Power and Women in the Wonderful Land of Oz
by Ashley Zozokos

Might, strength, and perseverance. These are the words that come to mind when one thinks of power. But words are not all that come to mind. Stirring images may appear as well. Perhaps it is the Superman icon that appears, heralding triumph as he saves the day, or perhaps the image is a much more homely image, such as the face of the neighborhood fireman. Regardless, power is a strength for which all of humanity strives. It is evident in our conquests, failures, lifestyles—life is about attaining power, holding power, and even losing power. And even in the wonderful Land of Oz, no one can escape its consuming clutches.

In the novel, Wicked, written by Gregory Maguire, whether it is Elphaba’s struggle with good and evil or the political turmoil of Oz, Maguire clearly depicts a world in which power is the determining factor. However, rather than depict the typical patriarchal society in which men dominate and hold the majority of power, Maguire’s female characters—such as Madame Morrible, Glinda, Sarima, and, of course, the protagonist, Elphaba—provide the backdrop of the story.

In discussing women’s roles and their correlation to power, often the strong woman is one that defies societal expectations; however, Maguire does not allow for this submissive role for any of his women as even Galinda, who molds herself around the traditional roles of women, is not seen as weak. The primary way in which Galinda, or Glinda, is viewed as powerful is in her active choice to become the wife, or the “good” Witch that Madame Morrible predicted her to be. Even within the audience’s first encounter with Galinda, it is clear that she is aware of her situation in life. In fact, upon arriving to the train that will transport her to Gillikin, Galinda reasons to herself that “because she was beautiful she was significant, though what she signified,
and to whom, was not clear to her yet” (Maguire 65). Galinda is not unaware that she is beautiful, and for a woman, this attribute does provide certain privileges, and Galinda knows this. Galinda draws on the fact that she is beautiful, and as a result, she uses her beauty for her benefit. She knows she can get what she wants because she is attractive and, to her, what else is a girl supposed to be?

Prevalent in Western culture, women have been expected to be three things: patient, gentle, and finally, beautiful. Even within the myths and fairy tales across the world, it is as Marcia Lieberman states, in her article “Some Day My Prince Will Come…,” that the “beautiful girls are never ignored; they may be oppressed at first by wicked figures, as the jealous Queen persecutes Snow-White, but ultimately they are chosen for reward” (385). Just as Cinderella wins Prince Charming through being submissive and kind, so do beautiful girls win the same treatment. An attractive girl can neither be evil, nor a threat. It is a blessing, and if a woman is not beautiful than it is a curse that she must try and overcome.

Galinda draws off her beauty and gains power because she is attractive; yet, she is anything but submissive, as it is clear later in the novel. And although Galinda follows the path set down for her by Madame Morrible, Galinda is not a weak character in the least. She influences her surroundings as a wife, a witch, and a woman. In fact, it is Glinda who makes the dire decision of leaving the ruby slippers in Dorothy’s care, which ultimately leads to Elphaba’s death.

Perhaps the best example of Glinda’s power is evident in the final exchange between Glinda and Elphaba. In defending her decision, Glinda tells Elphaba, “‘I take all the credit in the world for my own foolishness. Good gracious, dear, all life is a spell. You know that. But you do have some choice’” (Maguire 346). Here, Glinda admits that she has made decisions, thus
supporting this idea that her role is not merely one given to her, but rather it is a role that she, herself, has chosen. Glinda then continues, “‘having some motherly instinct somewhere inside this pushed-up bosom of mine, I gave her Nessa’s shoes as a sort of protection’” (Maguire 346). Glinda makes the active decision as a motherly figure to give the shoes to Dorothy as a means of protection. In this way, her association with her gender as a mother and wife give her power, as she is the one who actively decides to protect Dorothy rather than submit to any other ideal than her motherly affection for the girl. Finally, it is Glinda, in this conversation, that tells Elphaba, “‘There is no power in [the shoes] for you’” (Maguire 347). Glinda provides the voice of reason, and using her motherly intuition tells Elphaba what the reader already knows—shoes will not bring her the love of her father.

Glinda gains control because of her ability to accept her gender, but this does not limit her, rather it gives her the power to affect the political atmosphere, which is most prominent in the giving of the shoes. In this manner, Maguire allows for the reinterpretation of traditional roles so that, even though Glinda is aware of her gender, she is able to affect her surroundings within the social expectations of her gender.

Sarima, too, provides yet another example of a powerful woman who accepts her limitations as a female. In spite of this, Sarima is not a weak character as she attains power through her decision to cling to the memory of a pure Fiyero. Sarima is the young bride of Fiyero and mother of his children. Left to lead her people after his death, she is given power through this political position; yet, it is through her interactions with Elphaba that her true strength is shown. Rather than forgive Elphaba and accept her apology, Sarima chooses to live in denial—she chooses to be the one who decides what will occur and when. As mistress of her household and leader of the alienated nation, she has a reputation to uphold and Sarima is very much aware
of this. Thus, Sarima must be strong for not only herself, but her people. She must be the protector, the knowledgeable, and “man” since Fiyero is gone. All eyes look upon her for strength, and she must perform, so that although she is “aware of the cynicism that seethed beneath her loyal remembrance of Fiyero, aware of her overbite; of her lost prettiness; of her weight; of the silliness of being the doyenne over nothing but irritating children and backbiting younger sisters,” Sarima cannot allow herself the pleasure to be submissive to anyone, even Elphaba’s (Maguire 249). As a result, she makes a conscious effort to be in control or dominant in the conversations with Elphaba as she tells herself “Beware, she’s taking the direction of the discussion into her own hands. This won’t do” (Maguire 253).

It is interesting that Maguire would show this power play between two women. Often the emphasis is largely placed between the relationships between the different sexes, yet here, Maguire uses two women struggling for dominance. According to Ruth Bottigheimer, in her essay “Fertility Control and the Modern European Fairy-Tale Heroine,” “the pen, nearly always held by a male hand, inked directions for what women should and should not do” (38). Men have been the ones dictating the roles of women and “inking” the direction of history. They have been the victors and the leaders of nations, but such is not the case in Oz. Instead, the reader finds Sarima, a woman, in charge. And between Sarima and Elphaba, it is Sarima who wins the power, as she is in control of Elphaba’s redemption. The power that should be a man’s to affect and influence the lives of others, seems instead to be held by a woman, as only she can provide forgiveness. And rather than give into Elphaba’s wants, Sarima makes it clear that it will be her decision as she tells Elphaba, “I have a right to hear and I have a right not to hear. Even to make a traveler feel better” (Maguire 254). She is the author of her life, and in this way she breaks
gender conventions as she does not “wait for male rescue, or at least something to happen”—she
devises her life (Harries 100).

Yet, Maguire does not merely illustrate how women are powerful within their expected
roles in society. In addition to the above women, Maguire also includes women that defy gender
expectations. One example of such a woman in his novels is Madame Morrible. Although
Madame Morrible is by far the least prominent female character in Maguire’s story, she still
plays a crucial role in the politics of Oz, due to her occupation at Shiz. As headmistress, Madame
Morrible oversees all student affairs at Shiz. She is responsible for the advancement of her
student’s studies and personal lives. In fact, it is Madame Morrible who is responsible for the
initial pairing of Galinda and Elphaba. Yet, throughout the novel, it is unclear what Madame
Morrible’s intentions are. Is Madame Morrible on the Wizard’s side? Is she the leader of a
different political cult? Who is her boss? Despite these lingering questions, Madame Morrible is
anything but a weak woman, and although “‘the stage called, but [she] chose a life of Service to
Girls,’” Madame Morrible is clearly motivated in her decisions (Maguire 86). The only question
that remains is what is her motivation behind these decisions?

The clearest example of her undying motivation comes from the Binding Spell. In
performing the Binding Spell, Madame Morrible approaches the three future “witches” of Oz—
Glinda, Nessarose, and Elphaba. In Madame Morrible’s speech to the girls, she notes the unrest
in Oz, as she states that the political scene is “‘setting communities on edge, ethnic groups
against one another, bankers against farmers and factories against shopkeepers. Oz is a seething
volcano threatening to erupt and burn us in its own poisonous pus’” (Maguire 158). Since the
turnover of power to the Wizard, it is clear through Madame Morrible’s dialogue that all is not so
wonderful in the Land of Oz. In fact, it is a “seething volcano.” There are unseen powers at play
here, and clearly there is an apparent struggle between the ones with power, like the Wizard, and the powerless, like the Munchkinlanders.

Madame Morrible then continues on to illuminate this societal conflict by stating, “‘Our Wizard seems strong enough. Ah but is he? Is he really?’” (Maguire 158). Once again, she questions the true power of the Wizard, as she introduces the idea of doubt. Is the Wizard really capable of handling his affairs or does he need women to help him rule effectively? Clearly, it is Madame Morrible’s opinion that the latter is true. In this way, Maguire first breaks with the traditional roles between women and men, as he gives his female characters the power. Because the Wizard needs these young women as “generals” for his domain, it is the Wizard who is perceived as weak and not the women. This contradicts prevalent thought, as even Madame Morrible states, “‘Well, a man is always good for the public face of power, no?’” (Maguire 158).

According to Margaret Marini in his article “Sex and Gender: What Do We Know?,” “power, privilege, and status have rarely, if ever, been shared by women and men on an equal basis” (96). In fact, even in today’s society, despite all lingering discussions and persistence on equality for all, women are still seen as beneath men. Men are the powerful caregivers, responsible for providing and supporting their families, while women are the docile, cooperative housewives subjugated to caring for the home. But does that mean that women do not share an important role in society because they are the caregivers? Are they merely submissive and the followers? What do women contribute to society?

In yet another source from a book review entitled “Mistress of her Intergalactic Domain,” written by Katie Mediatore. Yet, if it is true that “men are the conqueror-explorers of unknown worlds” then perhaps it is, as Mediatore states, that “women are the shapers and builders of new societies” (“Mistress of Intergalactic…”). Men need women as much as women need men, and
Madame Morrible is not blind to these relationships between the two genders; if anything, it is Madame Morrible who takes advantage of this position. She has authority and can provide the working hands of Oz, if only she can “rub” off on the girls, and it is for this reason that Madame Morrible is more than just the average schoolteacher.

Although each of the previously discussed women are powerful, it is perhaps the protagonist, Elphaba, who holds the most controversial role and powerful yet, as rebels against the traditional roles of women by choosing her own destiny. From the onset of the novel, it is clear that Elphaba is anything but submissive to her role. Even in birth, “there was no wail, no bark of newborn outrage. The child opened its mouth, breathed, and then kept its own counsel…The baby shirked its obligations” (Maguire 19). Elphaba is not the sort of Cinderella girl who will wait patiently for her Prince Charming and be told what to do. She will make her own decisions, on her own time and in her own way. It is her free will that sets her apart from the other women of the novel, as this is her driving force, and it is this quality that makes Elphaba interesting to the reader.

Since Elphaba is not the Cinderella type, Elphaba then becomes the tragic hero of the novel, as she is victimized for being different or as Lieberman would put it the “interesting girl” (389-90). According to Lieberman, in fairy tales “the underlying associational pattern of these stories links the figures of the victimized girl and the interesting girl; it is always the interesting girl, the special girl, who is in trouble” (389-90). Clearly, in Wicked Elphaba is the “interesting girl.” She is unusual as she advocates for justice for the Animals, outspoken as she speaks against the harming of the lion cub, and outcast for the green hue of her skin. And as a result, she suffers for her independence.
Throughout the course of the novel, Elphaba transforms from a green girl to a witch; however, Elphaba does little to incur such a title. As Alissa Burger points out in her essay, “Wicked and Wonderful Witches: Narrative and Gender Negotiations from The Wizard of Oz to Wicked,” Elphaba, “rather than being truly evil or even magically gifted, simply names herself a ‘witch’ in response to her position on the fringes of community, and for the freedom of movement and power the title affords her” (128). In Wicked, Elphaba performs no magic. She even majors in Environmental Sciences instead of sorcery. The only element in which Elphaba retains her role as defying societal standards is in her revolting against the Wizard. It is Elphaba’s desire to overthrow the Wizard that causes her to become the Wicked Witch of the West and for her to adopt the title as witch.

Yet, Elphaba does not merely gain power by calling herself a witch. Instead, her power comes through assuming this position. Through becoming a witch, Elphaba then becomes capable of “enact[ing] her embodied power outside the realm of social acceptability, marginalized as a witch” (Burger 104). She can do as she pleases without being further scrutinized because she is already viewed as unusual. Elphaba becomes the woman society fears—a woman who craves change. Elphaba will not be satisfied with simply becoming a mother or wife. She must have more. She must have the Wizard overthrown, and she will stop at nothing to accomplish this. Thus, Elphaba becomes “dangerous because she is a woman who wants…this depiction of an autonomous woman is of course a nightmare vision of feminine power, a grotesque of female appetite” (Burger 127). As a result, it is as Milczarck states in their article “The Witch in English Literature: Negotiations of Power and Gender Politics,” that in being a witch, a woman’s “status of being condemned relegates them to a liminal realm where they are no longer under the control of the patriarchal order” (133). It is through her desire and
Elphaba’s unconcern for society’s norms that Elphaba gains power and assumes her role as the Wicked Witch of the West.

Additionally, Elphaba is illustrated as a powerful character because of her struggles. Her resilience against the face of adversity allows her to grow and provides her with the perseverance to fight the Wizard. For example, when Elphaba revisits her struggles in Oz, she tells herself that “she would emerge. She always had before. The punishing political climate of Oz had beat her down, dried her up, tossed her away—like a seedling she had drifted, apparently too desiccated ever to take root” (Maguire 4). Clearly, Elphaba has undergone her fair share of obstacles as she has been “beaten, dried up, and tossed away,” yet this does not stop her—instead, it makes her capable. And because she is capable, “any action that is performed against her is not only legitimized but also feed from the cultural taboos typically surrounding the celebration of death” (Burger 78). In the end, she becomes a martyr—a tragic hero—for simply being a woman desiring change against an oppressive government.

Clearly, Elphaba is a strong woman since she endures against adversity and chooses her destiny; however does this make Elphaba more powerful than say Glinda or Sarima? What is truly a woman’s power? According to Marini, “Within a society at a particular point in time, individuals come to adopt gender-specific behavior, attitudes, and dispositional traits…that perpetuate gender role differentiation,” meaning that society defines what is feminine and masculine (109). And it is clear that these thoughts are then perpetuated as women like Elphaba become repulsive because of their aberration towards their roles. There is this dichotomy between the accepted behavior of women and what is deemed “unwomanly” and according to Milczarck, “Women could be good, proceeding from virginity to marriage and maternity and die after a virtuously spend widowhood. Or they could be wicked: scolds, whores, or witches” (61).
But why must a woman be categorized so? Why must she be good or wicked, and not powerful?
Is power truly only a man’s trait?

The answer is no. A woman can be powerful. She can change her surroundings. She can lead a nation. She can fight. She can be a mother. She can be a wife. She can be what she chooses, so long as this is her choice. Women can be more than just docile, submissive housewives. Maguire shows us this as his women prove that there is no one particular way for a woman to be powerful. Women are just powerful by being women. And Maguire is able to accomplish this because of his revisioning of the *Wizard of Oz*. It is as Elizabeth Harries states in her book *Twice Upon a Time*, through Maguire’s telling in *Wicked* that he “build[s] on, revise[s], and change[s] the story as it has come down to [him], rereading it in [his] own ways; pouring new wine into the old bottle that [he] know[s] from the written tradition” (8). He has created a world in which women are not limited by their roles. His women have free will and the ability to manipulate their surroundings, thus suggesting that extent of a woman’s power is not determined by society, but rather the individual and her own desires.

Through each of the women present in the novel *Wicked*, Maguire attempts to paint an image of female power. For some of the women, this involves molding themselves to the roles society has chosen for them. For others, it is defying these same expectations. Yet, it is through his women characters that Maguire truly captures what it means to be a strong woman. Being a strong woman does not necessarily mean one must defy the traditional roles of mother and wife, nor does it mean fitting these same roles. In the end, being a strong woman requires the strength to choose for one’s self, regardless of the expectations thrust upon them.
Bibliography


