

## Cross-dressing in Children's Adventure Fiction: Does it always challenge Gender Stereotypes?

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### ABSTRACT

Gender identity is nowadays widely agreed to be socio-culturally constructed. Children's books may have a powerful impact on such constructions, particularly in the mid-twentieth century before the supremacy of television and digital media. Much popular children's fiction of this period has been dismissed as conforming to, rather than challenging, gender stereotypes. Is this in fact too simplistic a picture? Victoria Flanagan (*Into the Closet; Reframing Masculinity*) has theorised that in children's adventure fiction females take on male identities to gain agency, often very successfully, while males perform femininity less successfully and generally with comedic effect. This study of six cases of cross-dressing in British children's fiction does not support this view. Cross-dressing may be primarily a plot device aimed at heightening the mystery and tension; female cross-dressers may be passive and 'feminine', while males may in fact outperform females in the 'opposite' gender role and on occasion gain an agency through that cross-dressing which was denied them in their male attire. In all the cases explored here, the cross-dresser was a subsidiary character rather than a protagonist, and this may be key to determining how cross-dressing is portrayed.

**Key words:** Children's Fiction, Cross-dressing, Gender Identity, Gender Roles

### INTRODUCTION

Our development of gender identity begins at birth, or possibly even earlier as our parents buy clothes and toys suitable for whichever gender they are expecting (Franklin 26-7). By age three-four children are making fairly clear distinctions between 'what girls do' and 'what boys do'. Their socialisation comes from parents, from peers, and from the media. Studies show for example that children who watch a lot of television per week have more stereotypical views on gender than those who do not (Lamb and Brown 75). For today's children, television and video games are probably more powerful than books; in the mid twentieth century, the printed word had a major influence on many children. As Kimberley Reynolds says (*Girls Only?* 38) "The reading experience is very potent" for children, who do not stand back from the story but lose themselves in it. John Stephens agrees on the importance of texts in the construction of identity:

Texts for young audiences are not mere narratives, but have an orientation towards models and ideologies already present in culture and, by giving these narrative form, may reinforce them and refract them back to the culture or may propose some modification of them (40).

Does a character assuming the 'opposite' gender role tend to reinforce or to propose modification of cultural norms? Victoria Flanagan's studies of cross-dressing in children's fiction suggest a distinction here between female-male and male-female.

There are numerous examples of women assuming a male identity in the real world, from the sailors and soldiers of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (Stark 83-88) to George Eliot, the Brontes and Dr James Barry, who practised from 1813, fifty years before Britain's first official female doctor (Heilmann 84). In a patriarchal society this may be the only way for a woman to achieve liberty or agency. Fiction has often reflected this: for example, Angelica, a cross-dresser in Sarah Grand's *The Heavenly Twins* (1893) says "I wanted to *do* as well as to *be*" (qtd. in Heilmann 85). Victoria Flanagan, looking specifically at children's fiction, suggests that female to male cross-dressing is "almost exclusively used as a form of rebellion against rigid patriarchal social structures" (*Reframing* 82). Her male to female paradigm, by contrast, involves a male secure in his masculinity, who "adopts the clothing of a female for a brief interlude" (81), who performs femininity poorly and is immediately detected.

In this article I suggest that there are other models to be found in British children's adventure fiction in the mid-twentieth century, where cross-dressing may be more for purposes of plot than presenting any challenge to social gender roles, and where males may in fact outperform females. During a recent study of gender roles in children's series fiction of this period (Poynter), I encountered ten cases of cross-dressing in the one hundred and twenty six primary texts which were the focus of the study. It appeared that when the cross-dresser

was a child below the age of puberty Flanagan's distinction between female-to-male and male-to-female did not apply. Moreover, adult males might on occasion perform femininity successfully and yet without sexual ambiguity, and in some cases actually gain more agency in a female persona. I shall explore these patterns below.

The wider study focused on (mostly) series fiction by seven authors, three male and four female. The six cases I shall examine here are from texts by Enid Blyton (1897-1968), M.E. Atkinson (1899-1974), Gwendoline Courtney (1911-96) and Captain W.E. Johns (1893-1968). These authors are likely better known to British than global readers. Blyton and Johns were both extremely prolific, producing several hundred books apiece, Blyton's featuring children mostly between ten and fourteen, Johns' with adult protagonists. Both these authors were dropped by Oxford University Press in the 1950s as being not sufficiently 'literary'; it is for this reason that I chose to examine them closely, since they were (and are: Blyton was reported by Rudd (168) as still selling eleven million copies per year as recently as 2009) enormously popular and therefore had the opportunity to influence large numbers of children.

## SIX CASES OF CROSS-DRESSING

### Passive and Feminine Girls

Blyton has two examples of children cross-dressing in the texts I studied: Berta, whose age is not given but who seems to be ten or eleven (*Plenty of Fun*, 1955) and Gustavus or Gussy, aged eleven (*Circus*, 1952), who are each disguised in order to evade possible kidnapping. Flanagan suggests that while "males who cross-dress in children's literature rarely do so voluntarily" (*Into* 50), the females in her study "demonstrate courage and audacity in their decision to transform their gender" (*Reframing* 83), but in Blyton neither gender makes the choice for themselves. Berta's disguise is suggested by her father, and she objects strenuously, crying out "I won't! I WON'T!" (49) and later complaining that "Girls with short hair like boys look so silly" (60), and refusing the suggested names Tom or Jim in favour of Lesley, her middle name, which is gender-ambivalent.

Unlike Flanagan's paradigm, where the female cross-dressers tend to fall short of the ideal feminine in their original roles, Berta is a very feminine little girl. The daughter of an American scientist who has been warned she may be kidnapped as a lever against him, she is sent to stay with the Famous Five: Julian, Dick, George (Georgina) and Anne. She is seasick on arrival (often an indication of weakness in children's adventure fiction), and is described as "a slim, pretty little girl with large blue eyes and wavy golden hair" (36-7). She immediately arouses the disgust of George, with whom she is constantly contrasted. George is the classic tomboy, who insists on the abbreviation of her name, always wears boy's clothes, and imitates the mannerisms of her cousin Dick. She despises Berta for wearing a nightdress not pyjamas, and for not being keen on adventures. She is also chagrined that, once disguised, Berta looks more like a boy than she herself does, because Berta's hair does not curl, and

that Berta can swim at least as well as she can (swimming is identified by Blyton as a 'masculine' skill; Anne, the feminine girl, is poor at it, while George is "a much better swimmer" than the boys: *Treasure Island*, 30). Flanagan's heroines are compared with biological males:

A necessary strategy of the narrative is the constant comparison that occurs between her own male behavior and the behaviors of the other biological males who surround her...This is equally true in *Alanna*, where the female cross-dressing protagonist must perform her version of masculinity within the most challenging of contexts - a medievalist school for knights in training. (*Reframing*, 84)

Berta, by contrast, is compared with George, another girl, although George herself is sometimes compared with the male characters.

Throughout *Five Have Plenty of Fun* we have the tension between what girls are meant to be like (sweet, docile, pretty, unadventurous) and what they may actually be like in practice (bold, skilful, daring). This could result in a true challenging of traditional gender constructions, but it never quite does. Blyton herself fought with her mother over her own disinclination for domestic pursuits, and in later life subordinated her husband and children to her own career (Stoney 18, 93). Yet her books are full of gender stereotypes, almost as if she were trying to compensate for some perceived failure to match the social norms of her day. George is probably her most memorable character, and apparently based upon herself, yet she is portrayed ambivalently; she is constantly praised for her courage and skill, yet a close examination of the language reveals vastly more negative descriptors relating to her temper, defiance and sulks.

In this book we have Anne, the youngest, who is sympathetic to Berta's plight and stays out of the main action, exhibiting the traditional feminine traits of empathy and passivity; Berta, the reluctant cross-dresser whose appearance is convincing but who is stigmatised (by one of the tomboys) as a coward and a cry-baby; George, who is kidnapped by mistake (the villains are looking for a girl dressed as a boy, and she fits the bill), and who the others are sure will not reveal the truth and endanger Berta, because they trust her courage; and finally Jo, a gypsy girl, skilful and resourceful. When the boys go to rescue George they 'forbid' Jo to come with them, but she follows anyway, and when they are captured too, it is she who saves the day. Anne and Berta are viewed as 'normal' girls, while George and Jo are in some senses admired but also transgressive.

'Normal' girls like having long hair and wearing pretty frocks, and they are always portrayed by Blyton in a positive light; all the adults like Anne, and in the Adventure series Lucy-Ann, also the youngest, is explicitly the "favourite" (*Sea* 53). In a crisis, they do as they are told (by adults or by the boys). Those girls who enjoy and are good at adventures are anomalies: George the tomboy in boy's clothes and Jo the gypsy, who in previous books lived rough with her father. Berta may look like a boy but she lacks masculine characteristics. Cross-dressing does not give her agency: it is not her choice and she constantly protests against it rather

than learning how to perform her new gender, and indeed returning to her own clothes at the first possible moment. George, who stars in twenty-one books, chooses a male persona very explicitly because she despises feminine attributes and desires the freedom of being a boy, and to some extent she succeeds. In several of the books strangers take her for a boy, and her skills at swimming and rowing, or her boldness and initiative, frequently lead to a successful resolution of the adventure, yet there is always a 'but', always the sense that in choosing to be boyish she is defying convention and therefore must be more generally defiant, sometimes rude, frequently aggressive. Where aggression in a boy might be positive, an aspect of "hegemonic masculinity" (Connell 77), in George it is negative, earning blame and punishment. This is a classic of girls' fiction from the nineteenth century onwards; for example Jo in *Little Women* is punished for quarrelling with her sister Amy when the latter falls through the ice while skating and nearly dies.

M.E. Atkinson was a more subtle writer than Blyton who portrayed in her books a wider range of both feminine and masculine subjectivities. Contemporary reviews compared her to Arthur Ransome, though she won no prizes and her popularity has not survived into the twenty-first century. Like his, her plots are more credible than Blyton's, involving supposed ghosts which turn out to be a cat, or Loch Ness-type monsters which are actually pranks, rather than gun-runners, smugglers and kidnapped princes. Yet her cross-dressing children bear a striking resemblance to those of Blyton. She also presents a girl who is weak and passive, though not explicitly opposed to cross-dressing.

In *Going Gangster* (1940) the protagonists, Jane and Bill Lockett, aged fourteen and eleven respectively, are blackmailed into assisting an eleven-year-old girl, Patsy, escape from boarding school. Patsy is a gypsy child who has been sent to school by a well-meaning school governor, and is miserable there; the Locketts' rival Fenella, who attends this school, has decided to 'rescue' her, and co-opts the Locketts to do the actual work. Everything is determined by the forceful Fenella, and Patsy simply does as she is told.

"Help her to do a bolt?" asked Bill.

"Practically *bolt* her," Fenella told him. "For a gypsy kid who's knocked about in fairs and all that, she's like a bit of chewed string." (48).

She is consistently portrayed as passive, with references to "her usual apathetic manner" (158), and long discussions between the other characters as to the best course of action, with no contribution from Patsy. Like Blyton's Berta she is also frightened and tearful, more than once bursting into tears or "making good use of her handkerchief" (117), although Jane Lockett's reaction is sympathy, in contrast to George's scorn for Berta.

Like Berta's, Patsy's cross-dressing is instigated by someone else, in this case by Jane Lockett. In fact, there is no urgent need for the disguise as Patsy has already been dressed in someone else's clothes so her school uniform will not be recognised, but Jane enjoys adventures. She herself happens to be wearing shorts, and insists on exchanging her shorts for Patsy's skirt, bandaging the poor child's head to hide her long hair, and adding a borrowed boy's hat (153).

At this period, of course, both boys and girls did frequently wear hats, which would be distinct in style. Predictably in light of her previous passivity, Patsy makes no attempt to behave like a boy, but the other children address her as 'John' when others are in earshot, and she does seem to be accepted as male: a railway porter identifies the group as "two boys and a girl" (239), i.e. Bill, 'John' and Jane, and when they meet an old friend of the Locketts he makes no comment except about the bandage (224), although since he does not use a pronoun in referring to 'John' the reader cannot be sure he has not identified her as female.

Berta is at least vocal, and we know her feelings about her male attire. Patsy says almost nothing throughout the book, with the reader's attention focused on the Locketts and a boy named Terry who helps them. Patsy is simply a vehicle for Jane Lockett's imagination and initiative. The book features two girls who are strong characters, leaders, intelligent and active: Jane takes the lead in the 'escape' with her brother, Terry and Patsy, who are all younger than herself, cycles, climbs trees and organises everyone, while Fenella takes risks going out of bounds and swimming in dangerous seas, and masterminds the whole 'escape'. Each of these has full agency in her own, female, persona. Patsy, on the other hand, does not change or grow in any way through her foray into male attire, and remains a minor character even though she is 'onstage', so to speak, for more than half the book.

### Successful Male Cross-dressers

In Flanagan's paradigm the male cross-dressers possess stereotypically masculine characteristics which prevent them from performing femininity convincingly, but this was not true of any of the cases in my larger study, as exemplified here. Blyton's Gussy is initially despised by the other children: Jack, Philip, Dinah and Lucy-Ann. When he first meets them, he holds out his hand to Jack's parrot; the bird bites him and draws blood, and he makes a great fuss about this (17). Shortly afterwards, he bursts into tears (20), and they refer to him thereafter as "the cry-baby". Naturally, when travelling he gets car-sick. And when he throws a book at the parrot, Dinah fights him, knocking him down and banging his head on the floor (37); his response is to yell, rather than fight back.

Despite all these weaknesses, he is not at all happy at being forced into girl's clothes, a reluctance in line with Flanagan's paradigm. He is actually a prince, nephew of the king of Tauri-Hessia (one of those imaginary Central European countries beloved of adventure writers); a wicked count wishes to depose the king and put Gussy on the throne as his puppet. Gussy and the other children are kidnapped, escape, and take refuge in a circus which is then searched by the count's soldiers. Males of the royal family traditionally have long hair, which prompts the idea of dressing him as a girl to prevent recognition during this search. Gussy is "very angry, and very ashamed" (150), yet he performs effectively: "Gussy, you were absolutely marvellous! Talk about an actor! Why, you're a born actor! A shy little girl to the life" (158). He fools the soldiers, and earns the praise of the other children, which delights him because:

He was not often praised by the others, and it was very pleasant to have them admiring him for once in a way. Then he caught sight of himself in Ma's mirror, ribbons and all, and his face clouded (159).

For Gussy, the cross-dressing episode is almost a rite-of-passage into true masculinity. Unlike Berta, once he has accepted the role he makes the most of it and behaves convincingly. Hitherto a nuisance whom the other children have to protect and put up with, he now takes action on his own behalf, earning their praise where formerly they felt scorn. And at the end of the book, when he is reunited with his uncle the king, he demands that his hair be cut in defiance of tradition: "It is my hair," said Gussy. "I want it short - snip, snip - like Philip's and Jack's. I will not look like a girl, I WILL NOT!"

His uncle agrees. The experience of cross-dressing, however briefly, has transformed Gussy into a more typical boy, finding courage in adversity and taking control of his own life. His hair is cut short to fit in with the males he admires, symbolic of this deeper transformation. Gussy's initial differences from the traditional masculine are portrayed entirely negatively, as weaknesses. Jack and Philip, who take the initiative (in this book it is Jack who saves the others; he stows away in the boot of the car in which they are being abducted, then in the plane which flies them to Tauri-Hessia, successfully locates their prison and engineers their escape) are the positive models. Sometimes they are afraid, but they are always brave, confident, risk-takers, descendants of the 'manly' boys of turn of the century adventure fiction (Nelson 140-43; Reynolds, *Girls Only?* 63-90).

Rather different from Gussy, because by no means a 'sissy', yet for that reason more surprisingly successful, is Robert Morvyn in Gwendoline Courtney's *Mermaid House*. Apparently in his mid-twenties, Robert is bold, confident and a risk-taker. After a wild youth, which culminated in his running away from his guardian, he worked for British Intelligence, and now he is investigating a gang of thieves on his own account. He apologises to his guardian for having run off: "I suppose it was just the Morvyn blood in me - you know we've never been happy without adventure and danger" (189), and another character who knew him as a boy says: "He isn't happy unless he's risking his neck somehow" (204). In this respect he conforms to Flanagan's paradigm of the male-female cross-dresser being "first and foremost male" (*Reframing* 81). However, where her study found that such males were ill-at-ease in their female garb, and therefore instantly detected, Robert Morvyn maintains his role comfortably for some time. He is already living in Miss Pendragon's house when the four Greystone children, Giles, Fay, Anthony and Peggy, come to stay with her. She is in the secret, having known him for years, but to the outside world he is "Miss Cathcart", and he is accepted as such by the children, who live in the same house for several days without suspicion.

The children are the protagonists, and the story unfolds from their viewpoint. Because they are deceived, so is the reader, hence we lack the characteristic of many tales of cross-dressing where the reader has a knowledge not shared by the other characters. Writing about adult cross-dressing, Iglesias says:

In all accounts of the cross-dressing sailor, from Shakespeare to *The Female Marine*, the story commences with the act of assuming male dress. The reader is aware of the masquerade from the beginning. As a narrative device, cross-dressing is effective precisely because the reader is usually the only participant in the story (with the exception of the cross-dresser herself) who is aware of the masquerade. Crucial to the convention's narrative design is the fact that the reader must interpret all of the cross-dresser's behaviors and actions differently from the way in which other characters within the story do (290).

In the children's adventure stories I have examined, this perspective is lacking: with the child cross-dressers, we do indeed see "the act of assuming male [or female] dress", but so too do the main characters within the story; those to be deceived are the villains of the piece. In the case of the adult cross-dressers, the assumption of female attire has occurred before the story began, and the reader is deceived along with the story's other characters. Thus we lose the potential for comparison between the 'real', biological women and the cross-dressing males, in favour of a surprise twist in the narrative.

Initially in *Mermaid House* the children meet "another, younger woman, with a mass of brown hair, quite a pleasant face...and a lazy, indolent manner that showed even in her slow, rather husky voice" (17). They take breakfast and tea with her, and even though various mysterious events make them suspicious of their great aunt, Miss Pendragon, and therefore alert to any odd behaviour, they continue to accept "Miss Cathcart". The deception of the reader is maintained even after Fay discovers the secret; Robert's wig slips and he is forced to kidnap her in order to prevent her giving him away before he can round up the villains, and for two chapters we see Fay's viewpoint in her captivity, but Robert is referred to as "the young man", "her captor" or "Mr X", so that the reader does not make the connection between her captor and "Miss Cathcart". For Courtney, Robert's disguise is part of the mystery, and she heightens the suspense by concealing the truth as long as possible.

Robert clearly performs femininity effectively. He tells Miss Pendragon and his guardian and uncle, Dr Morvyn, that the reason he did not take them into his confidence about his investigations was that "[n]either of you is any good at acting" (184), the implication being that he himself is. When, after having revealed himself to the children, he resumes his wig and make-up, Fay admires the effect: "Wonderful! I'm not surprised we were taken in" (195). There is no suggestion here of the humiliation felt by Gussy on his assumption of female attire. Robert merely remarks that "I've always been keen on female impersonations—I've done it in various shows ever since I was at school" (182). He is so secure in his masculine identity that it only serves to imbue him with confidence in his cross-dressing, rather than creating embarrassment and a consequently poor performance.

There is no clear dichotomy between "Miss Cathcart" and Robert as himself. Miss Cathcart is supposedly delicate, but this is merely a ruse to explain the fact that she spends a lot of time resting, because Robert is out investigating every

night and needs to catch up on his sleep during the day. She is therefore sometimes described as "indolent", but when there is a need for action she becomes brisk and decisive, as when Fay has disappeared and Miss Cathcart leads the search for her (though of course, she is acting here, as we discover later, having been responsible for the disappearance). Robert as himself is always alert and energetic, more fully himself, but in both his personas s/he is calm and confident.

The criminals in *Mermaid House* believe they have co-opted Robert to work with them, using his knowledge of the area where he was brought up (caves, secret tunnels) to aid their activities, and they therefore think he has assumed his disguise as a cover, so that no-one local will recognise him or imagine he could be involved, when the thefts are discovered. The purpose of Robert's cross-dressing is to hide, like Gussy, Berta and Patsy, but only in order to be able to act in his own persona without anyone knowing. Robert's true identity is known to the crooks but not to the protagonists; he is hiding from the 'good' characters rather than the enemy, and when he acts it is as himself.

Although very different characters, both Gussy and Robert perform the feminine successfully, the one perhaps because of a lack of traditionally masculine characteristics, the other despite an abundance of them.

### Can Males Gain Agency through Cross-dressing?

As I have observed (section 1), in both real-life and fiction females may gain agency by assuming male attire, and this is frequently their motivation for doing so. However, my examples suggest that this may also on occasion be true for males. Firstly, there is the case of Robin in Atkinson's *Smuggler's Gap* (1939). Unlike Blyton's Gussy, he is not at all weak or effeminate, although he is very young, only seven. He is introduced to the reader through a postcard he sends to the Locketts, asking for help: "Plese come at once. Anna is losst. Plese come and find her. There is noboddy to help. From Robin" (12). Anna is his older sister, who has mysteriously disappeared during a holiday in the Scilly Isles, and the little boy takes the initiative when none of the adults will tell him anything, and sends for help. The older children give him credit, "He's so sensible" (12), and give him a full share of their discussions when he points out that "I'm not a baby" (31). At the same time, because he is so young, Atkinson permits him to cry without being regarded as weak, in contrast with the landlady's son Maurice, who is eleven; when Maurice starts crying the Lockett boys, Oliver and Bill, feel very uncomfortable. Where Gussy is mocked and teased by the other children, arousing irritation and disgust with his lack of traditional masculinity, Robin is praised and admired for his courage and common sense.

In some ways, their cases are parallel. Like Gussy and the girls, Robin's cross-dressing is suggested by someone else (Jane Lockett again). Like Gussy, he hates the idea (136) yet, like Gussy, he succeeds in convincing others that he is a girl. When he and Bill are caught trespassing by an angry farmer, the latter refers to him as "the little lady" (155). There is a clear distinction, however, in terms of motivation. Gussy is disguised solely for protection, while Robin wishes to follow

his landlady on one of her mysterious boat trips, and needs to avoid recognition. Although he is not happy about the type of disguise, at the same time he is delighted at the prospect of action:

Robin hated the thought of dressing up as a girl, but it was worth it - for Anna's sake. At last it looked as if he might actually be going to see her - or at least the cottage where she was. He felt wildly happy - but, even so, he did hope the frock would not have too many frills (136).

When they are caught by the farmer, he behaves with uncharacteristic defiance, startling his companion, Bill, who thinks "It must be those curious clothes that were affecting him" (155). Though he looks like a girl, and the farmer takes him for one, he performs a more aggressive masculinity than usual in compensation. In no sense is it questioned that looking like a girl is a humiliation for a boy, any more than it is in the Blyton book, although in *Smugglers' Gap* Jane comments that "All little girls like to wear boys' things. I always did" (135). This does support the paradigm of male attire giving females a freedom they would not otherwise have, while males are seen as being emasculated by female garb. However, this is not really borne out by the actual narratives, since Patsy remains passive and docile in her boy's clothes, while Robin uses his cross-dressing to go out and look for his sister. Despite "[f]eeling utterly ridiculous" (138) he is determined, and this determination is part of the courage he displays throughout the book.

By a curious coincidence, the boy cross-dressers in this study are named Gustavus and Robin, and the men are Robert and Gustav. The last of these bears a resemblance to Robert Morvyn in that he deceives both the reader and the protagonists, yet in other ways he is more similar to little Robin, gaining a kind of agency through his cross-dressing. He first appears in chapter four of fifteen and is exposed as male in chapter eight. *Biggles—Secret Agent* (published 1940 but set before the War) features flying aces Biggles (James Bigglesworth) and Algy Lacey, and their teenage protégé, Ginger. Biggles is tasked by the British government with ascertaining whether a scientist, Professor Max Beklinder, reported killed in an accident in Central Europe, is actually dead or has in fact been 'taken' by an enemy power. Once again, as in *The Circus of Adventure*, we have an imaginary small country (Lucrania) as the main scene of the action. Biggles and Ginger parachute into Lucrania and quickly encounter a "girl, young, good-looking, dressed in a neat brown tweed costume" (65), who seems to be eavesdropping on them.

Throughout the chapters in which we believe she is a girl (i.e. young woman; in books of this period, women up to the age of at least thirty were often described as 'girls'), she is a definite actor. When the protagonists interview the local undertaker, she lurks outside the house trying to overhear the conversation. When they take a room at the village inn they find her staying there, and as they go up to bed, a door closes: she has been watching them (83). That night, they sneak out of the hotel to investigate the vault where the Professor is supposedly buried (and find nothing but books in his coffin), and are startled in the graveyard by "something white" which gives a "wild screech" (95); as Biggles remarks, it

was “rather a clever idea to dress up like a ghost” (97). Later they see footprints on “the girl’s” sheet when the chambermaid is changing the beds, and realise that it was she who had had this clever idea. After confirming that he is not in fact dead, Biggles decides to investigate room seventeen, in which the Professor had allegedly died, but discovers the key gone from the rack in the hotel reception; he makes a spy hole from his room into the other, and observes “the girl”, in a nightdress, searching it (107) and finding a secret passage (108). Although it is the heroes who successfully question the undertaker and open the coffin, “the girl” plays an active role in the drama.

Again, the next day when Biggles and Ginger go into the forest to where they have hidden a carrier pigeon in order to send a message, they see stormtroopers and dogs apparently hunting someone (naturally they fear they are the target and hide), and “the girl” comes “[r]unning like a deer out of the heart of the forest, panting with exertion and wide-eyed with alarm” (122). She is vigorous, energetic, athletic, though here no longer in control of her actions as the enemy pursue her. All this changes dramatically once ‘she’ is revealed as male.

From the moment of his arrest, Gustav becomes merely another prisoner to be rescued by Biggles and his friends. They observe through a spyhole the Professor meeting his son, now in male attire, under guard at the castle. Then the pair are moved by car and Biggles holds it up at gunpoint and rescues them; almost the entire conversation is with the Professor, the father, not the son. The Professor is given orders: “Do exactly as you’re told” (188) and “Follow me, please” (201), but Gustav is effectively ignored. The Professor takes this a step further by treating the young man as a child, telling him to “Be careful with that” (192) when Biggles passes him a revolver. In the narrative too he is referred to as “the boy”, although he is nineteen. Later in the story he provides some useful information about another secret tunnel, but it is Ginger (who is probably sixteen or seventeen) who uses it to rescue Algy, also by now a prisoner, leaving the two Beklinders to wait passively for his return.

Gustav’s case seems to be a strange mirror-image of all the cross-dressing girls and women of fiction who gained agency through assuming a male identity and then, frequently, reverted to ‘normal’ femininity once the masquerade was over. As a young woman, he moves around freely and acts boldly, investigating his father’s disappearance. We discover that the reason for the disguise was that the authorities had arrested him after his father’s supposed death, and had him “certified insane, and placed in a mental home” (207). He escaped, and immediately assumed female dress in order to pursue his investigations. Ginger acknowledges the courage this took: “That was a plucky thing to do” (208). All this courage and activity dissipates once he is revealed as male, and his role becomes entirely passive.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The cross-dressing children in this study tend, in John Stephens’ words, to “reinforce and refract” the “models and ideologies already present” in the culture of the 1940s, rather

than “propose some modification of them” (40). Britain has a long tradition of “breeches performances” (Iglesias 312), actresses assuming male attire, and children’s fiction has a long tradition of tomboys from Jo in *Little Women* to Nancy Blackett in Arthur Ransome’s *Swallows and Amazons* series. Thus a girl dressing as a boy, particularly if she is pre-pubescent, is acceptable. When the girl concerned remains, despite her attire, passive and ‘feminine’, her cross-dressing becomes merely a quaint episode. Berta and Patsy’s cross-dressing is just that, dressing, a matter of clothing only. Judith Butler has claimed that “gender is always a doing” (34), performative, “constituting the identity it is purporting to be”. Wearing gendered clothing is part of that performance, but when the “acts, gestures, enactments” (185) that accompany the clothes fail to match them, does this challenge the “essentially polarized model” (Reynolds, *Come Lads* 99) of gender prevalent in the 1940s and still powerful today? I would argue that no, the implication is rather that a feminine gender identity cannot be modified by a mere change of costume.

Blyton’s George is of course far from passive. Her boy’s clothing is a positive choice, and she makes every effort to perform what she perceives as a masculine gender. This involves a scorn for traditional femininity beyond what the biological boys feel; where they are protective and tolerant towards their little sister, George is often rough and contemptuous. She is frequently taken for a boy by strangers, and is admired for her skill at swimming, rowing and climbing, as well as her courage. Yet ultimately, by laying so much stress on the superiority of male over female, she too “reinforces” the cultural norms.

This privileging of the male underlies the sense of humiliation experienced by Gussy and Robin during their cross-dressing episodes. Yet, unlike Toad in *The Wind in the Willows* or Huckleberry Finn (Flanagan *Into* 141-3) their performances are not laughable or inept. In *Into the Closet*, Flanagan claims that “Children’s narratives rely on the male cross-dresser’s complete inability to give an authentic performance of femininity” (xvii). Gussy however wins the respect of his peers, which had been lacking, through his performance of femininity, and thereby paradoxically gains the confidence to insist on the haircut which will symbolise his new-found masculinity. Robin is seen as courageous and determined, taking on a female role in order to look for his missing sister. Referring to the heroine of Fenimore Cooper’s *The Pilot*, Luis Iglesias writes that “[c]ross-dressing temporarily affords her the ability to move in a hostile territory without calling attention to herself” (285); this is Robin’s motive in *Smugglers’ Gap*. The other three children described here cross-dress for protection, but it affords them no particular agency; the primary concern is to hide from the enemy. Robin does more than this: like many a female cross-dresser, he uses his disguise to enable him to act as he would otherwise be unable to do.

Kimberley Reynolds has pointed out that boys read less fiction than girls and tend to prefer action stories, “oriented towards exploration, mastery and confidence” as opposed to girls’ books which are “concerned with examining relationships and internal states” (*Girls Only?* 43). The mixed adventure fiction which developed in Britain in the 1930s, ‘40s

and '50s was largely quite 'masculine' in this sense, focused on the action and with little character development, and this is especially true of Enid Blyton. She prioritises masculine values throughout her adventure series (her girls' school stories are strikingly different), and her cross-dressers play their part in this. Berta does not want to look like a boy because it's not 'nice'; she prefers the role of sweet passivity ordained for the female, implicitly encouraging girl readers to accept this. Gussy is humiliated by his female clothes and responds by becoming a 'real' boy once he is released from them. And George, who might have presented an alternative femininity, instead merely reinforces the power of the male by constantly seeking to acquire it and denying her biological sex.

M.E. Atkinson contrives to combine elements of traditional boys' and girls' fiction. Although termed 'adventures', her stories are playful, with reasonably possible plotlines. There are no confrontations with gun-runners or spies, and although most of the characters do not develop significantly, they do at least experience real fears, such as Jane Lockett's fear of cows, and Anna's fear of letting her friends down by her lack of athletic prowess. These elements are more consonant with girls' fiction than boys'. Atkinson has intellectual boys and tough, active boys, shy girls and domineering ones: altogether a wider range of personalities than Blyton, and unlike Blyton she never excludes the girls from the action. Yet her cross-dressers are no more inspiring than Blyton's. Patsy is, if less reluctant, at least as passive as Berta, and Robin, like Gussy, sees girl's clothes as a deep humiliation. We do not with either author have the "sharp disjunction" between female-male and male-female cross-dressing observed by Flanagan (*Reframing* 79); unlike Flanagan's examples, the boys here seem to be rather more successful than the girls at performing the 'opposite' gender.

Captain Johns' protagonists are often a long way from the 'frank', 'manly' heroes of Henty or Talbot Baines Reed. Biggles, for instance, is described in an early story as:

Slight in build, his features were as delicate as those of a girl, as were his hands, which fidgeted continually with the throat fastening of his tunic. His deep-set hazel eyes were never still, yet held a quality of humour that seemed out of place in a pale face upon which the strain of war, and the sight of sudden death, had already graven little lines (*Pioneer*, 28).

Of course, Johns had first-hand experience of men suffering from shell-shock, which Kimberley Reynolds has pointed out (*Girls Only?* 76) "was a form of male hysteria" and "regarded as an affront to masculinity". Johns seems to have had a far more understanding attitude than the official line, and his characters do show weakness and even break down in tears on occasion. And while his protagonists are all courageous and determined, they win though mostly by brain rather than brawn; they tend to be slim, medium height or less, and rarely hit anyone with their fists, although they are good shots. Equally, in his *Worrals* books for girls, the female protagonists are bold, good pilots, take the initiative, love adventures and order men around. Perhaps it is not altogether surprising that Gustav Beklinder turns the norms of cross-dressing on their head.

Victoria Flanagan found that, despite the heterogeneous nature of the female-to-male cross-dressing examples she

studied: "these narratives cohesively employ cross-dressing as a unique and effective strategy through which to interrogate gender stereotypes" (*Into* xv). The cases examined in this article do not fit this paradigm and ultimately both female-to-male and male-to-female examples fail to challenge, let alone subvert, social constructions of gender. Why?

These authors, focusing on the adventure genre, are using cross-dressing as a plot twist. The cross-dressing itself is strategic and transitory, except in the case of George, whose cross-dressing is a feature of all the Famous Five books. For the children, it is an exciting thing to do, 'dressing up' as children often do in play, but with a serious purpose here. The child reader is invited to see it as a kind of game, part of the larger game of fantasy in the book as a whole; few children are likely to have believed they would really meet kidnappers or spies, or outwit them if they did. The cross-dressers are not the protagonists (except for George), and so they become just part of the adventure, one of the characters encountered briefly by the heroes, and manipulated by them. Even Robin, who has the most agency and the largest role, because he is so much younger than the rest is not really a protagonist in the Lockett books.

In the case of the two adult males, the plot twist is different, not just a game but a fooling of the reader and indeed the protagonists. This heightens the mystery to be solved, but it does not challenge gender constructions. We see this in the fact that in none of these books is there much description as to *how* the cross-dresser performs gender. In some of the Famous Five books George puts her hands in her pockets, whistles, and "tries to walk like Dick" (*Down to the Sea* 28), and Gussy pretends to be a shy little girl, hiding his face (157-8), while the references to Robert Morvyn's acting ability suggest he was doing *something*, but the reader is never told what exactly, except for the reference to Miss Cathcart's "husky voice" (17). The authors focus on physical appearance rather than behaviour, and specifically on hair.

Both experiments and interviews indicate that hair-length is an important index of gender attribution for both adults and children (Butler and Weatherall 234). Perhaps it is not surprising therefore that Berta's transformation consists chiefly of having her hair cut like a boy's, Gussy's of having his tied up with ribbons, while Patsy and Robin have to wear hats to hide theirs. Gustav and Robert are both betrayed by their wigs falling off: Gustav's comes off in the struggle with the stormtroopers when he is arrested, revealing his gender to Biggles and Ginger, and Robert's slips off in front of Fay, causing him to abduct her so she cannot betray him to anyone else.

Clothing is another aspect of physical appearance. Flanagan's *Alanna* not only wears male clothing but "must prove her masculinity in terms of strength and military prowess" (*Reframing* 84). G.A. Henty's Nita in *A Soldier's Daughter* not only dons a lieutenant's uniform but fights with the men against a besieging army, and later takes the lead in saving herself and her male companion from captivity. Flanagan suggests that physical appearance may be ignored, as "[t]he key to the female cross-dresser's masculine success is her ability to walk, talk, and act like a man" (*Into* 30). In my study, there is sometimes description of the clothing but little

of accompanying behaviour. We know that Berta and Patsy are wearing shorts (and yet the regular girl characters also sometimes wear shorts). Gustav wears his “brown tweed costume” (65). There is actually surprisingly little description of clothing, in fact. Lamb and Brown have concluded that “[w]hether it’s T-shirts, pants or sleepwear, according to marketers boys live for action and girls live to look cute” (18), even in twenty-first century America, where questions of gender equality and gender identity have been publicly discussed for decades, and choice of clothing is apparently freer than ever before. The division may be more subtle than it used to be: between a pink T-shirt with a ‘cute’ slogan and a blue one with “Class President—Now Do What I Say”, as opposed to that between a floor-length cumbersome gown and a pair of breeches, but it is still there. It was much more simplistic in the period of this study. I would have expected descriptions of the cross-dressers’ clothes to highlight their transformation.

What we actually see is more subtle, perhaps. If the role of the cross-dressing is to provide an interesting plot twist rather than in any way explore gender constructions, the mechanics of how it is achieved become trivial. There is an assumption that donning the clothes and hairstyle of the ‘other’ gender is sufficient for a successful performance. Gender in these books appears to be about the outer appearance, not the inner self.

With the exception of Blyton, these authors do in fact in various ways offer alternatives to traditional, polarised gender roles. Atkinson makes Jane Lockett the eldest and a leader, and her rival Fenella is reckless, aggressive, confident and a great athlete, all traditionally masculine attributes, yet no-one ever compares her to a boy. Courtney wrote both girls’ books and mixed adventure fiction: her works feature bookish intellectual boys (Oswald in *Stepmother*) and bold, daring girls (Maud Loring in *The Wild Lornings*, who casually climbs from one first-floor window to another to demonstrate how someone could have burgled the prefects’ room), as well as more predictable characters. Captain Johns’ later Biggles books include the rather effeminate Bertie Lissie, who “is afraid of women” (*Orchids* 85), and in the Worrals books the heroines are full of initiative, enjoy adventures, fly well, shoot villains, and Worrals even on one occasion hides in an (occupied) coffin from her enemies (*Goes East* 154). Courtney and Johns both explicitly challenge traditional feminine stereotypes, though not masculine ones. Yet none of the four employs cross-dressing to do so. It remains a mere element of the adventure or mystery, unexplored.

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