

# Experimental Girls: Feminist and Transgender Discourses in *Bill's New Frock* and *Marvin Redpost: Is He a Girl?*

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## Introduction

Children's literature studies have in the last fifteen years paid a great deal of attention to the representation and construction of gender (for example, see work by Clark, Trites, Kidd, Clark and Higgonet, Lehr, Stephens, Cart and Jenkins). Much of this work has originated from within a feminist context and/or from writers interested in exploring the representation of gay, lesbian, and bisexual characters. More recently queer theory, in the wider sense of a theoretical project that aims to "seek out instability in traditional paradigms of sex (biology/anatomy), gender (social/cultural manifestations of sex), and sexuality (sexual orientation and desire)" (Rabinowitz 19), has also begun to feature in children's literary criticism, particularly concerning works written for young adults (Cowan, Rabinowitz, Pugh and Wallace, Latham, Flanagan 213–51).

There are obvious affinities and areas of common interest between these approaches. Studies that work to expose the heteronormative and cisnormative assumptions built into many children's texts, for example, are likely to draw on critical approaches that were developed within feminist criticism in order to analyze the "nor-male" order of patriarchy. Moreover, challenging the dominant models of sexuality and gender can be viewed as a feminist practice in itself, given that such models work primarily to entrench the privileged position of heterosexual, cisgendered men. Nevertheless, relations between feminist and queer theory have not always been harmonious. As discussed below, for some within radical feminism the project of deconstructing such binaries as gay/straight or male/female has been seen as, at best, a distraction from the more

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urgent political project of addressing the oppression of women and, at worst, an attempt to dig the philosophical ground out from under feminism's feet by denying intellectual coherence to the category of "woman" itself (Jeffreys, 32–56).

In this article I trace some of these debates, particularly as they took place in the years just prior to the start of the 1990s, when queer theory was beginning to emerge from the feminist and gay rights movements as a distinct intellectual and political approach. Focusing on the contested status of gender, and especially of individuals with non-normative gender identities, I shall then consider two texts for younger children that appeared at this significant historical moment and the ways in which they accommodate or resist feminist and queer readings.

*Bill's New Frock* (1989), by Anne Fine, and Louis Sachar's *Marvin Redpost: Is He a Girl?* (1993), the third in Sachar's series about the many dilemmas of an elementary school boy, are texts notable for their numerous obvious similarities. Both are short chapter books aimed at six to nine year olds; both humorously recount the experiences of a young boy who spends some time as a female. Bill Simpson, the protagonist of Fine's book, awakes one morning to find that (like Kafka's Gregor Samsa) he has undergone what he regards as a monstrous transformation: he has become a girl. For the rest of the day he is treated as such by parents, teachers, and friends alike—none of whom seems aware of anything untoward. After school, having ruined the pink frock in which his mother dressed him that morning, Bill is allowed to revert definitively to boyhood, although both he and the reader have meanwhile been alerted to the very different treatment received by girls and boys in the world at large. Sachar's protagonist, Marvin Redpost, is told by a female classmate that he will turn into a girl if he manages to kiss his elbow—a prospect that both appals and attracts him. Eventually he manages this feat, and although he retains his male genitalia (watching his sister use the toilet he reflects, "at least in that way, he knew he was still a boy" [28]), he finds himself becoming increasingly feminine in his appearance, tastes, and behavior, to the extent that he begins to think of himself as female. Again, the book ends with a reversion to the *status quo ante*, following a second (accidental) elbow kiss.

The correspondences between the two books include not only their general premise and conclusion but many more specific features. Both explore the world of the playground and the mixture of indifference and fascinated hostility with which girls and boys regard each other. Both play on the taboo of entering the other sex's bathroom. Both describe (and illustrate) a scene in which the protagonist finds a female face staring back at him from the mirror. Both make use of anxiety dreams and the fear of being seen in public in the "wrong" clothes. Although these texts use similar topoi with which to disrupt gender expectations, however, I will argue that their similarities mask important ideological differences.

## The Sex-Gender Distinction and Second-Wave Feminism

Any discussion of texts in which the protagonist changes sex necessarily involves the distinction between gender and sex, which assumed such importance within second-wave feminism in the 1970s. This distinction—in which sex was conceived as a natural and physical attribute, and gender as a cultural and psychological one—introduced flexibility in terms of both sexual politics and social policy: for example, in countering suggestions that certain roles and occupations were “natural” to women. By separating sex and gender feminists were able to establish a conceptual space in which to describe and oppose the system of cultural practices through which patriarchy preserved the association of biological femaleness with those behaviors and attitudes gendered as feminine, and biological maleness with those behaviors deemed masculine. In other words, it allowed for a description of the social construction of gender itself.

One project of second-wave feminism, therefore, was to demystify the mechanisms that decreed the assumption of given gender roles according to physical sex. However, there was no unanimity as to what those mechanisms were, the extent to which they were capable of challenge, or the ways in which such a challenge might be most effectively mounted. Some within the women’s movement were beginning to forge a philosophical and political position that re-envisioned the possibilities of individual and collective agency with respect to the gender system. For others, however, a critical attitude to biological determinism coexisted rather uneasily with an insistence that the consequences of being raised as a girl in a patriarchal culture were so profound that, even for those who subscribed to a socially constructed model of gender, authentic female identity must be seen as the exclusive prerogative of those born physically female: “We know that we are women who are born with female chromosomes and anatomy, and that whether or not we were socialized to be so-called normal women, patriarchy has treated and will treat us like women . . . No man can have the history of being born and located in this culture as a woman” (Raymond 114). Such a position might involve language ironically similar to that of the biological determinists in its objectification of “woman,” creating what Judith Shapiro has described as a “marriage of convenience between a social constructionist view of gender and an essentialist view of womanhood” (259). Under this view, the differences between female and male experience were no longer seen (as in patriarchal ideology) as complementary aspects of a harmonious natural order but rather as the product of a more radical incommensurability that, combined with the oppressive nature of existing institutions, might be cited in justification of a separatist agenda. In fact, the sex-gender distinction, far from subverting the inevitability of sex-determined gender construction, could be seen as re-inscribing that process as political dogma and even adding to it an ethical dimension, with women being enjoined to assert solidarity in the face of their common position within patriarchy. As Biddy Martin observed:

to the extent that gender is assumed to constitute the ultimate ground of (women's) experience, it has, in much feminist work, come to colonize every aspect of experience, psychological and social, as the ultimate root and explanation of that experience, consigning us, once again, to the very terms that we have sought to exceed, expand, or redefine. (Martin 12)

The difficulties involved in reconciling the possibility of agency with due recognition of the radical and nonelective nature of the processes of gender formation are clearly displayed in a text such as Susan Griffin's "An Answer to a Man's Question, 'What can I do about Women's Liberation?'" Griffin's repeated advice to the man of the title is to "Wear a dress," where wearing a dress functions (as in *Bill's New Frock*) as a metonym for experiencing all the disadvantages faced by women:

Borrow a child and stay in the house all day with the child,  
or go to the public park with the child, and take the child  
to the welfare office and cry and say your man left you and  
be humble and wear your dress and your smile, and don't talk  
back, keep your dress on, cook more nice dinners, stay  
away from Telegraph Avenue, *and still, you won't know the  
half of it, not in a million years.* (Griffin 36; emphasis added)

Griffin's text illustrates the different ways in which questions about the nature of gender formation feed into feminist identity politics. Initially the speaker appears to suggest that living as a woman will give the man an understanding of women's experiences and frustrations. However, the poem concludes by ruling out this hope as futile and retreating to a position in which the possibility of understanding is already foreclosed. Which, then, is more fundamental: men and women's shared humanity (and the consequent possibility of understanding and political cooperation), or their very different socialization and positions within patriarchy? In Griffin's poem apparently incompatible positions are juxtaposed, but no attempt is made to reconcile them. Empathy is demanded from the man asking the question in the poem's title, but this empathy is then dismissed as hopelessly inadequate, with the implication that no man is in a position to take (or even authentically imagine) a female subject position.

## **Cross-Gender Models and Queer Theory**

One locus for the dispute about the inexorability of gender construction in the late 1970s was those individuals whose physical anatomy seemed not to "fit" their sense of their own gender, particularly male-to-female transsexuals. Transsexuals might at first sight seem to offer a welcome if extreme confirmation of the independence of gender and physical sex, as encapsulated in the traditional (if crude) formula of being "trapped in the wrong body." However, the idea that transsexuals had developed a gender identity contrary to their anatomy and socialization presented an obvious challenge to social constructivist theories of

gender formation. This was sufficient reason for radical feminists to regard that claim with deep suspicion, a suspicion exacerbated in the case of male-to-female transsexuals in particular by the perception that they aspired to a particularly conventional form of femininity—a set of “patriarchally prescribed stereotypes” (Raymond 77) characterized by domesticity, submissiveness, and an emphasis on physical prettiness—that rendered them unlikely allies for those working for women’s empowerment. Even where transsexuals identified themselves as feminists they might be accused of attempting to “possess women at a deeper level, this time under the guise of challenging rather than conforming to the role and behaviour of stereotyped femininity” (Raymond 99). Such transsexuals could be seen as a patriarchal fifth column, infiltrating masculinity into physical and cultural spaces that had been the preserve of women.

In the debate I have outlined, both those who saw transformational possibilities within the field of gender construction and those who took a more deterministic view tended to preserve the binary discourse of male and female, masculine and feminine. Whether or not it was possible for a male-bodied person to “be” a woman and vice versa, the orthodoxy survived more or less unscathed that everyone had a male or female core gender identity—even if that identity was now a function of patriarchal ideology and of feminist resistance to that ideology rather than of one’s physical sex directly. While the abolition of the gender system remained a long-term objective for radical feminists, in practice this was a utopian goal, and the immediate questions of gender politics were predicated on binary assumptions. In the 1980s and early 1990s, however, writers such as Judith Butler and Sandy Stone challenged both the notion that there were only two genders and the assumption that the gender system was effectively incapable of modification. “If gender is constructed,” Butler asked, “could it be constructed differently, or does its constructedness imply some form of social determinism, foreclosing the possibility of agency and transformation?” (*Gender Trouble* 7). In *Gender Trouble* and later books Butler answered her own question by arguing that agency was indeed possible, although not in the simplistic sense of one being able to “choose” one’s gender *a la carte*. In fact, the binary Butler attacks most profoundly is not that of male and female, or even that of sex and gender, but rather the idea that the human subject must be either a rational, Cartesian agent assuming its own nature through an act of pure, contextless volition or else a helpless product of its environment whose every act and desire is determined by external forces. According to Butler’s account, we intervene in the gender system not from without but rather as already-gendered subjects constituted by our repeated participation in that system. Thus, we are not free to “opt out” of gender altogether or take a perspective on it from the outside; nevertheless, gender’s cultural construction makes it vulnerable to subversion and disruption, for example, through parodic practices such as drag (*Gender Trouble* 142–49; *Bodies that Matter* 230–32).

Traditional accounts of gender, whether medical or feminist, often turned on the difference between authentic *being* and inauthentic *acting*. Thus Harry

Benjamin, for a long time the leading medical authority on transsexualism, wrote that “while the male transvestite *enacts* the role of a woman, the transsexualist wants to *be* one and *function* as one” (Benjamin 46; emphasis in the original). Equally, Janice Raymond’s fundamental objection to male-to-female transsexuals in her book *The Transsexual Empire* was that they were acting as something that they were not: “It is precisely because the transsexually constructed lesbian-feminist is a man, and *not* a woman . . . that he can play our parts so convincingly and apparently better than we can play them ourselves. However, in the final analysis, he can only *play the part*” (Raymond 103; emphasis in the original).

In the light of Butler’s work, both Benjamin’s distinction between transvestites and transsexuals and Raymond’s between transsexuals and genetic women seem less secure. Words such as “act,” “perform,” and “play” are in any case ambiguous, as we can see by comparing, for example, the phrases “Reagan’s performance as a cowboy” and “Reagan’s performance as President.” To act is always to assume a role, but to say that one takes on a role (of woman, or husband, or sister, or friend) does not thereby imply a lack of authenticity. For Butler, humans have no mode of being separate from their many instances of action/acting. One’s gender and oneself as a gendered subject are the cumulative product of one’s gender performances and also, crucially, the ways in which these have been received—for one can perform effectively as president only insofar as one is read as such. This notion of performativity, which Butler adapted from speech-act theory, is central to her account, and more largely to the project of blurring and proliferating gender and sexual identities that has become known as queer theory.

### ***Bill’s New Frock as a Feminist Text***

Where in all of this contentious history can we place *Bill’s New Frock*? Anne Fine wrote her book in response to the differential treatment received by girls and boys at her daughter’s school (Fine “Interview”), and it is in many respects a traditional and recognizable feminist fable of the double standard. A classic precursor is Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s story “If I Were a Man” (1914), in which Mollie Mathewson suddenly finds that she has become her own husband, Gerald, “with only enough subconscious memory of herself remaining to make her recognize the differences” (Gilman 33). Mollie/Gerald takes a good deal of pleasure in the new freedom this transformation affords her in a world designed by and for men:

[G]rowing all day, wherever she went, came a new and delightful feeling of being *the right size*.

Everything fitted now. Her back snugly against the seat-back, her feet comfortably on the floor. Her feet? . . . His feet! She studied them carefully. Never before, since her early school days, had she felt such freedom and comfort as to feet—they were firm and solid on the ground when she walked; quick, springy,

safe—as when, moved by an unrecognizable impulse, she had run after, caught, and swung aboard the car. (33)

Fine, like Gilman, uses gender inversion to expose sexism, and *Bill's New Frock* is in many respects the mirror image of the earlier text. Where Gilman's Molly enjoys the sudden benefit of pockets ("Of course she had known they were there, had counted them, made fun of them, mended them, even envied them; but she never had dreamed of how it *felt* to have pockets" [33]), Bill Simpson is analogously afflicted by their absence ("How was a person in a frock like this supposed to *survive*? How were they expected to get along without any pockets?" [50]). As a girl, Bill finds that the teacher expects his handwriting to be neater than a boy's (and therefore does not praise him for his neatness); he is repeatedly admonished not to do anything that might get his dress dirty, and adults burden him with irksome tasks in the knowledge that girls are helpful and responsible. He notices too for the first time the way that boys' games monopolize the playground space, relegating girls to the margins.

Bill is a lightly sketched character who is clearly intended to be read as a typical (not to say stereotypical) boy in his attitudes and assumptions. Although over the course of the day he begins to appreciate the difficulties faced by girls, he never thinks of himself as female—and, indeed, the text's didactic point depends on the perceived incongruity between Bill's sense of his male gender and the experiences to which he is subjected as a girl. The text also demonstrates, however, the ways in which normative gender assumptions tend to efface actual similarities between the sexes. Again the parallel with Gilman is instructive, for while "If I Were a Man" makes it clear that men are the beneficiaries of patriarchy, Gilman saw patriarchy as thwarting the instincts and capacities of both sexes. Fine's is a similarly humanist project, critiquing the gender system for enforcing distinctions that have little or no natural basis. Thus, in Bill's class the strongest and fastest children happen to be female, but "tough" physical jobs are given exclusively to boys. Equally, Bill finds to his surprise that he enjoys the stories in the girls' comic *Bunty* and that he has been denying himself a real pleasure by obeying the taboo against reading them.

Throughout all of this Bill remains a passive figure. His protests against his situation are feeble and few, and he does little in the way of introspection. The cause of his transformation remains a mystery but not one we are encouraged to investigate. Rather, the book focuses on his objectification. As girl, he is a fit object for having his hair ruffled by his father, for being whistled at by Mean Malcolm, and for being used as an artist's model by the rest of his class during a lesson. From the beginning he is carried on a tide of seemingly inexorable events:

"I *never* wear dresses," Bill burst out.

"I know," his mother said. "It's such a pity."

And, to his astonishment, before he could even begin to argue, she had dropped the dress over his head and zipped up the back. (9)

It is of course necessary to the story that Bill go through his day as a girl rather than immediately taking off his dress in horror, and in the early part of the story Fine achieves this by using established techniques of fantasy and dream narratives, such as reflexive verb forms: “Bill found himself spooning up his cornflakes as usual . . . He didn’t seem to have any choice” (Fine 10; see also C. Butler, “You Are Feeling Very Sleepy” 185–86). Indeed, his entire experience may be an anxiety dream, a possibility raised on the final page of the book only to be dismissed as unimportant: “It doesn’t matter if it was a dream, or not. *Whatever it was*, it’s all over” (96). Bill’s lack of autonomy quickly ceases to be an effect of dream-logic or supernatural intervention, however, and is revealed as a function of his status as a girl:

When he reached the main road, there was an elderly woman with curly grey hair already standing at the kerb. To feel safe from the gang, he stood at her side.

“Give me your hand, little girl,” she said. “I’ll see us both safely across the road.”

“No, really,” insisted Bill. “I’m fine, honestly. I cross here every day by myself.”

The woman simply didn’t listen. She just reached down and grasped his wrist, hauling him after her across the road. (11–12)

Repeatedly, Bill’s attempts to express an opinion or assert himself are shown to be invisible to those around him or are interpreted in a way considered appropriate to his new sex. Bill does not “perform” femininity, but he hardly needs to because whatever he does is read by others within a feminine schema. When he gets into a fight with a boy in class, for example, the text stresses their physical similarity as they sit writing lines as a punishment: “They sat with exactly the same sour look on their faces. Both were still furious at the unfairness of it all. To everyone else, they looked for all the world like a pair of scowling and bad-tempered twins” (69). This similarity, however, serves as a foil against which to show the difference in people’s reactions:

And every now and then, someone would tiptoe past and whisper in Rohan’s ear:

“You look so *angry*.”

But in Bill’s they whispered:

“You look so *upset*.” (69)

Only once does Bill manage definitively to transgress gender rules. When he refuses to take part in a plan to deliberately lose a class race to Paul, a boy with a physical disability, he meets stern disapproval from the other girls in the class. Under their “cold, hostile glare,” his pleasure in having won the race evaporates, and he begins to feel “ashamed” and that “he’d let them down horribly” (85). Here, almost at the end of the school day, Bill shows some signs of internalizing the style of femininity that prizes private kindness above public acclaim:



however, the matter is not pursued. Fine's book is not about the construction of gender identity (the narrative refers to Bill by male pronouns throughout, even though both he and other characters acknowledge that he is a girl), and in fact Bill's male gender identity is shown to be irrelevant to the treatment he receives, which instead is determined by the gender assumptions of those around him—assumptions triggered in turn by the clothes he wears.

The gender-determining power of clothes is strikingly demonstrated in the first and last full-page pictures of Fine's book. Both show Bill Simpson standing in his bedroom, surrounded by such stereotypically male possessions as a football, a toy plane, and a rocket. Philippe Dupasquier's illustrations make the room and even Bill himself virtually identical in both images. In each case he is freckled, with rather unkempt hair and a rudimentarily rendered, plausibly unisex face. The only significant difference is that in the first picture he is looking shocked to find himself in a dress, whereas in the latter he is wearing jeans. But that, it seems, is the difference that makes *all* the difference. Although the beginning of the book implies that Bill has been transformed anatomically (even before his mother puts the dress on him he has discovered he is a girl and is "staring at himself in the mirror, quite baffled" ([7])), by the day's end the gendering power of clothes is supreme. Bill simply has to don his male clothes to effect his transformation:

He ran up to his bedroom and pulled on a pair of jeans and a shirt.  
Then he took the tiniest, sideways peep in his mirror.  
And then another, slightly longer, peep.  
And then a good, long stare.  
He was a boy! ( 94–96)

As with the sign on a toilet door, the semiotic power of Bill's jeans to indicate maleness is diminished not at all by the fact that all the other girls in his class also wear trousers.

Its obvious openness to feminist readings has made *Bill's New Frock* a favorite among British primary school teachers wanting to encourage class discussion of sexism. Nevertheless, both Beverley Pennell and Victoria Flanagan have objected to the ways in which the book renders the experience of being female as more or less uniformly disempowering, unpleasant, and (as far as a boy is concerned) humiliating. Flanagan in particular situates it within a misogynistic tradition of female burlesque, through which males are encouraged to reject the taint of femininity as emasculating. Bill's relief at finding himself male again is not mitigated by any sense that there are significant positive aspects to his time as a girl, nor is it accompanied by a resolution to show greater understanding of or consideration for girls and women in the future. Moreover, the one time that Bill stands up for himself as a girl, by fighting Mean Malcolm, it is by acting with physical aggression, something that tends to underwrite the greater efficacy of stereotypically masculine behavior (Pennell 61–64, Flanagan 151–54).

These criticisms have force to the extent that readers of the text are expected to identify with Bill's own point of view. Given that Fine provides no formal mechanism to distance the narrative voice from Bill's own—through direct narratorial comment, for example—a reading that takes Bill's reactions as normative is certainly possible. The story is also a consciousness-raising fable in which Bill stands as a generic Everyboy, however, and to consider this is to encourage a rather more analytical and distanced perspective on his experiences. In fact, Flanagan's account of the implied reader in *Marvin Redpost*—"the reader is positioned in the role of spectator, watching Marvin's antics as he struggles with the idea of becoming a girl" (Flanagan 155–56)—applies better to Fine's text. Bill's lack of an interior life tends to emphasize his symbolic function. As this observation suggests, however, the effectiveness of *Bill's New Frock* as a feminist text is partly dependent on the generic sophistication of its readership and on that readership's readiness to distinguish its own position from that of the protagonist.

### ***Marvin Redpost* and the Representation of Transgendered Subjectivity**

For Bill Simpson clothes maketh the girl, but in Sachar's book Marvin Redpost's gender questioning is more introspective in nature. There is no outward sign to indicate Marvin's feminization. Unlike Bill, Marvin does not undergo physical changes: he neither dresses as a girl nor alters his anatomy. Instead, the text focuses on gender's relationship to anatomical sex in a way that largely side-steps the particular taboos that accompany cross-dressing or the disconcerting discovery of physical transformation. It also pays due attention to the horizon of expectations within which Marvin's gender is read, not only by others (as with Bill Simpson) but also by himself.

Judith Butler has stated that "gender performativity is not just drawing on the norms that constitute, limit and condition me, it's also delivering a performance within a context of reception" ("Changing the Subject" 345). Marvin demonstrates his understanding of the importance of context to interpretation early in the book. When he wakes from a nightmare screaming, his mother assumes the voice is that of his little sister, explaining "You sounded like Linzy" (18). Marvin correctly understands his mother's reading as being shaped by past experience: "My mother heard a scream in the night . . . So *of course* she thought it was Linzy. Because Linzy is her little darling!" (20). Marvin's own interpretation of his gender is also affected by his changed horizon of expectations once he has kissed his elbow and become sensitized to the possibility of being a girl. Moreover, for Marvin *everything* is gendered, meaning that there is no safe or neutral territory for this fugitive from femininity. For example, when he tests out the sound of his voice, he is disgusted to find that the first words that occur to him are "Mary had a little lamb"—a "*girl poem*" (18); looking in the mirror, he finds to his horror that he has "a girl's nose" (25); and when he thinks of his pet lizard as gross, and then cute, he rejects both words because

(while contradictory) both seem girlish (25). More disturbingly, with so many indicators of gender available, how can one ever draw a final conclusion about one's own status? Contemplating the continued existence of his penis, Marvin consoles himself that he is still a boy "in that way" (28), but this genital evidence does not strike him as conclusive. Even to articulate the thought in those words is to acknowledge that there are *other* ways of being a boy, and other ways of not being one. How can one know whether male genitals count for more than a female nose?

Although the people around Marvin generally continue to see him as male, an important moment in his story comes when he confides his predicament to his sister Linzy. She has always wanted a sister, and rapturously accepts him as such:

"You'll be such a good sister, Marvin!" said Linzy. "We can play dress-up! And comb each other's hair. And you can teach me how to put on lipstick."  
Marvin smiled at his sister. "We can have a tea party," he said.  
"Yes!" said Linzy. "And no boys allowed!"  
Marvin laughed. (29)

It is this external confirmation that he *can* be read and accepted as female that first allows Marvin to consider the possibility of his changed gender in a positive light. Later in the book the enigmatic silences of Casey Happleton, the girl who first told Marvin about the effect of elbow-kissing, achieve a more complex effect. Casey alone suspects what Marvin has done, but she neither confirms nor denies that he has become more girl-like as a result:

"And your voice sounds so funny," said Casey. "What'd you do? Kiss your elbow?"  
He stared at her.  
She stared back.  
She knew.  
He knew she knew.  
She knew he knew she knew.  
He knew she knew he knew she knew.  
"No!" he said. "What do you think I am? Weird?"  
Casey bit her finger. (42–43)

We need not dwell on the Freudian implications of finger-biting to see that Casey's silent gesture (repeated at intervals throughout the book) effectively refuses to foreclose or confirm the possibility that Marvin has indeed changed—and that the transformation in his subjective experience is potentially endowed with performative power in the world beyond him.

The change in Marvin's interpretative schema accompanies experimentation in different types of gender *expression*. In class he begins to write more neatly (neat writing being for him, as for Bill Simpson, a female accomplishment) and adds a "tiny heart" over each letter *i* (37). When told that his class is to

go to the park, he claps his hands and cries “Oh, goody!” (42). Like a method actor, Marvin finds that the difference between altered gender expression and altered gender identity may be partly one of “growing into the role”—that, in fact, one is not born a girl but may learn to become one. Gradually he begins to identify with the girls in his class. He daydreams about having long hair, imagining the feel of it falling over his face. He finds that the voice in his own head is “a girl’s voice” (38), and talking to a girl classmate he remarks that “Boys are so immature” (46), clearly not including himself in the assessment. In a climactic scene he faces up to the class bully—not by physically attacking him, as Bill attacks Mean Malcolm, but verbally. His action is admired by his friends as masculine bravery, but by this time Marvin so strongly identifies as female that he has forgotten that others may not read him the same way. Asked after the event if he had been scared, he only just stops himself from pointing out that the bully “*wouldn’t hit a girl*” (55).

It is in moments such as these that *Marvin Redpost* queers essentialist notions of gender. Through Marvin, Sachar’s text presents a way of thinking about gender as significantly independent of physical sex. Instead, it is defined by one’s interpellation in certain kinds of expression and certain contexts of reading. These may constitute a style but never an essence because, for Marvin as for Judith Butler, “gender is neither a purely psychic truth, conceived as ‘internal’ and ‘hidden,’ nor is it reducible to a surface appearance; on the contrary, its undecidability is to be traced as the play *between* psyche and appearance” (*Bodies that Matter* 234). Marvin Redpost is not a child with a “core” gender identity so much as an expanding gender repertoire, albeit one that he does not fully understand or control and is unable to articulate given the strictly binary nature of the language at his disposal. The closest he comes to summing up his situation is when he looks at the class outcast, Patsy Gatsby, and reflects: “*Maybe she isn’t the weirdest girl in class . . . Maybe I am*” (35).

In her recent study of cross-dressing in children’s literature, *Into the Closet*, Victoria Flanagan rejects the use of queer theory as a perspective through which to read texts written for young children, preferring other critical paradigms such as the Bakhtinian carnivalesque. Her reasons for this exclusion are that such texts do not involve issues of sexuality of the kind that occur in young adult texts, and that they tend to show characters moving between normative gender categories rather than assuming non-normative ones (Flanagan 226). As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, among others, has shown, however, the taboos on unconventional gender expression imposed on boys are deeply heteronormative in character, with adults who disapprove of feminine behavior, for example, often citing a fear that it is an indicator of homosexuality (Sedgwick). Therefore, gender disruption already implicitly involves questions of sexuality, but the context of a book for younger children may also remind us that sexuality is more than just sexual orientation. It can include, for example, the sensual pleasure Marvin takes in daydreaming about having long, silky hair that he can swish from side to side and blow out of his face (39–40). Moreover, Marvin’s

fluid gender state is one that is clearly non-normative in Flanagan's terms. His initial panic and cognitive disorientation at being unable to classify himself as a boy or a girl transmute into a growing acceptance of the contradictions attendant on his new, more flexible condition.

The queer potential of *Marvin Redpost* is, however, comprehensively undercut by its conclusion. Just as Bill reverts to boyhood, so too does Marvin; and if Bill's unmitigated relief at finding himself no longer female makes this move problematic for those who would claim Fine's as a feminist text, Marvin's final metamorphosis is no less contentious for a queer reading of Sachar's. Immediately before the accident that causes him to kiss his elbow for a second time, Marvin has an epiphany in which he believes he knows both what it feels like to be a girl and what it feels like to be a boy. Crucially, the text describes this knowledge in terms of understanding the "secret difference" between the sexes (61). The exact nature of the difference is never divulged, since Marvin kisses his elbow and forgets it before he can articulate it to himself or to the reader. In the light of what has gone before, the idea of a "secret difference" sounds an oddly discordant note, for Marvin's experience until this point has tended to show gender as contingent, and potentially unstable, and subject to perception and contextual frames of reference. Now, instead, we are informed that there is a single (yet unnamed) difference that distinguishes boys and girls neatly and unambiguously. This seems an inconsistent and retrograde step and one that prepares the way for Marvin's post-accident reversion to the conventionally sexist opinion that "*Girls are just stupid and weird*" (67).

Unlike *Bill's New Frock*, Sachar's text qualifies this rejection of girls with a coda in which Marvin offers friendship to the unpopular Patsy Gatsby. Clearly, his episode of gender uncertainty has taught him a degree of empathy and given him experience in what it is like to feel like an outsider of any description. This is a welcome development, but it works only by incorporating his new understanding into a revised and slightly expanded notion of what counts as acceptable masculinity. The more subversive implications of gender proliferation and gender blurring are firmly sidelined, and Marvin seems a reduced and self-blinkered person as a result. The headlong flight to cisnormativity continues even into the book's endpapers, where the publisher anxiously informs us that "Louis Sachar has never kissed his elbow and has never been a girl" and, moreover, that he is married and a father. This statement of Sachar's cisgendered heterosexuality has not been enough to reassure some of his readers. A 2005 Amazon reviewer, for example, advised parents to "Keep you [*sic*] boys and girls away from this book (and likely away from the author)" (Beck). Bigoted as this and similar criticisms are, they indicate that the subversive potential of *Marvin Redpost: Is He a Girl?* has not gone unrecognized. For such an intriguing investigation of transgender subjectivity to duck its own implications at the end is disappointing, and Judy Norton's blunt questions about transphobia in children's books bear repetition in light of it:

When it comes to the semiotics of gender, there are almost more girls pictured in pants than in skirts. Why not a boy in a dress? Who is it, finally, that is going to be upset by such a depiction (and it is important not to assume that anyone is): children or fearful adults? And if that fear is phobic and discriminatory, ought we to capitulate to it, under the pretense of objectivity? (430)

## Cross-Dressing and Cross Purposes

Of the two books discussed above, Sachar's is the more obviously interrogative of binary gender categories, at least until its final pages. In the mind of Marvin Redpost the boundaries between male and female become diffuse and permeable, to the extent that both terms begin to lose their illusion of referential adequacy. Bill Simpson, by contrast, never feels himself to be anything other than male—a feature necessitated by his didactic role in Fine's text. Nevertheless, in Sachar's book the male/female distinction, while far less stable in terms of personal gender identity, remains largely unexamined at the societal level. Marvin does not register the daily disadvantages faced by girls: on the contrary, with their wide choices in clothing and appearance, their physical flexibility and poise, and their greater social sophistication, girls seem to him to enjoy an enviable lot. Nor does he question the essentialism underlying his belief that a desire to wear glitter on his clothes signifies that he is becoming girl-like—a construction that recalls the feminist criticism of male-to-female transsexuals for their adoption of stereotypically feminine dress and behavior. For Flanagan this recourse to patriarchal models of femininity is a weakness of the book (156–57). Nevertheless, Marvin's idea of femininity seems almost inevitable given his situation as a child thoroughly acculturated within patriarchy, for whom—as for many girls his age—an interest in prettiness *is* part of what constitutes being female. Gender identity, as Judith Butler has pointed out, is formed through the *repetition* of stylized gender expression. It is also dependent on one being “hailed” by others as one's gender, a feedback loop in which gender expression is constantly refined and confirmed (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 145). It would be strange if Marvin's expression of femininity were, in the absence of such a history, anything other than fumbling.

Fine's book, with its demonstration of the large overlap between girls' and boys' capabilities and interests, and its insistence on social conditioning as a crucial determinant both of gender interpretation and of differences between male and female behavior, goes further than Sachar's in claiming the categories of “feminine” and “masculine” as cultural constructs. Bill is effectively policed into femininity from without—by the restrictions of the clothes he wears and by the cues he receives from his peers and adult authority figures—rather than being driven by any subjective identification as female. Fine's exposure of society's double standards, however, is achieved only by neglecting the process of gender construction itself. Bill is little more than a convenient assemblage of stereotypically masculine attitudes, and both his transformation into a girl and his acquiescence in it are effectively bracketed by being assigned to an

inexplicable power quite as mysterious as Marvin's "secret difference." In the world of *Bill's New Frock* bodies and perhaps even attitudes may be changed, but binary gender identities are omnipresent and immutable.

In one sense Sachar's and Fine's books are complementary, queering and querying gender from personal and social perspectives, respectively. However, their different strategies suggest a troubling lack of engagement with each other's concerns. That the fabular form of Fine's feminist tale effectively precludes any enquiry into her protagonist's sense of maleness is not incidental but something that follows from her stated aim of showing that society treats people according to publicly defined gender categories *irrespective* of their subjective experience or individual capabilities. Equally, Sachar's portrayal of gender fluidity depends on Marvin's initially unquestioning attitude toward the public conventions of sex-specific language, dress, and behavior. It is only by exploiting these conventions, through which all aspects of social expression offer themselves as already-gendered, that the text is able to make its own brand of "gender trouble," illuminating ground that is usually only dimly visible between the flickering binaries of male and female. Thus, while both Fine's and Sachar's books offer a critique of the sex-gender system, they—or the feminist and transgender discourses that speak through them—seem to be talking largely at cross-purposes.

## Conclusion

It would be misleading to claim Fine's text as representative of "traditional" feminism and Sachar's of queer or transgender theory in any uncomplicated way, for neither book exhibits the kind of univocality that would allow them to be aligned neatly with any one theoretical position, nor are any of these movements themselves reducible in such a manner. Nevertheless, reading both texts together illuminates some of the points at which the political priorities of the feminist, queer, and transgender movements at the beginning of the 1990s can be seen either to conflict or to diverge. This period marked a turbulent point in the history of gender politics, with some second-wave feminists being criticized for making an unproblematic distinction between physical sex and social gender in terms of essentialist male/female binaries and a section of the transgender community—specifically male-to-female transsexuals—being attacked for quietism and the adoption of patriarchally defined models of femininity (Heyes 1095; Stryker 1–2). Almost a generation on, have developments within gender politics made it more, or less, possible to conceive of a children's book that is attentive to the concerns of the feminist, queer, *and* transgender movements?

There is, of course, no simple answer to that question because the history of these movements continues to be multidimensional. There are still feminists, such as Germaine Greer and Sheila Jeffreys, whose work recalls the writings of Janice Raymond in the 1970s in its disdain for transgendered people and their experiences (Greer 64–74; Jeffreys 44–50, 122–43). Feminism of the so-called



third wave, however, has in general discarded the hierarchical essentialism and adherence to totalizing perspectives that rendered some versions of feminist theory vulnerable to queer critique. Queer theory itself has broadened beyond questions of sexuality and sexual identity, and transgender theory has emerged as an independent area of academic study, one that articulates its relationship to feminism in a variety of ways. Thus we find Kate Bornstein arguing for a feminist transgender politics that focuses on the role of the binary gender system in oppressing both women and transgendered people (Bornstein 113–14). By contrast Julia Serano, while asserting that “trans activism must be at its core a feminist movement,” argues that feminist/queer disapproval of feminine gender expression echoes patriarchy in devaluing those qualities associated with women and is ultimately misogynistic (Serano 16, 319–43). For her part, Judith Butler has been at pains in her recent work to stress that her own writings, far from being anti- or postfeminist, are intended “to open up another possibility for feminist thought, one that would overcome its complicity in heterosexist presuppositions” (“Against Proper Objects” 2). More generally, she has called for a coalition of the feminist, queer, and transgender movements in the form of a progressive “New Gender Politics” (*Undoing Gender* 4). Overall, while the situation is in some ways even more fragmented and complex than before, a distaste for generalization and totalizing views has accompanied a renewed concern to find pragmatic common ground at the levels of both theory and political activism.

Does the space now exist in which the worlds of *Bill’s New Frock* and *Marvin Redpost* can meet? Can we imagine a Bill who asks himself *why* he finds being female so deeply shameful? Who wonders why not all the girls in his class share his desire to change into a boy? Who questions whether “girl” and “boy” are the only options available? Can we imagine a Marvin who challenges rather than merely muses on the taboos that prevent him from wearing sparkles on his clothes? Who not only notices that the girls outsmart the boys in games of chase but also asks why the game is defined in terms of boys chasing girls? Who concludes that there may be no definitive “secret difference” between boys and girls after all? When Fine’s and Sachar’s books appeared, such stories would have been hard to tell, in part because they might have struggled to find a publisher but also because the interpretative strategies and categories of understanding then dominant would have rendered them culturally illegible, or at best doomed them to aggressive misreading. I hope and believe that this is no longer the case. Even so, the children’s book has yet to be written that fully exploits the potential of these multiple discourses to blossom into dialogue.

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