

(En)gendering Children's Literature in the Western Paradigm: What the Critics don't Tell us about Gender ...

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Abstract

Drawing on children's literature criticism, this paper will be looking at the issue of gender in relation to children's literature. Is gender inherent in the text or rather an imposed construct? How does a text get "gendered" and to what ends? In other words, what are the underlying cultural assumptions when a children's literature text is launched as boys', girls', or LGBTQ children's literature? What is the very process that naturalizes and stabilizes gender and in consequence legitimizes a text as being addressed to a specific gendered readership? By exploring the notions of representation, classification, mission and the alleged relatedness of the author's gender to the textual construction of gender and to gendered readers, my contribution will look into the above questions so as to shed light on the construction, naturalization, and imposition of gender on literary works for children.

Key words

gender, representation, LGBTQ literature, heteronormativity, classification

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to look into some aspects of the language certain critics and literary theorists deploy so as to theorize about gender concerning children's and young adult literature. While focusing on the idea of gender, my contribution explores how the child and children's literature at large have been constantly discussed and theorized as stable entities and positioned as fixed identities. In particular, assumptions that seemingly underlie recurrent terms employed in children's literature discourse such as the notions of representation, classification, mission, and the relatedness of the author's gender to the textual construction of gender are analyzed.

I argue that theorization about gender, in its multiple facets across criti-

cism, although it appears to be part of a progressive politics, is still inscribed in the well-documented binarism of education vs. amusement that critics such as Karin Lesnik-Oberstein (1994) have shown to concern much of children's literature production and criticism.¹ By producing, promoting, and criticizing books that focus on gender identities, adults in their various capacities as authors, editors, booksellers, librarians, teachers, and children's literature critics dictate to children or/and their guardians what is expected from them or what is "proper"/"natural" or socially accepted in terms of gender identities. In other words, literature that takes as its subject gender becomes yet another tool for educating children as to their gender identities which therefore are considered to be knowable, fixable, and unchangeable.

The wide range of the topic under discussion and the length confines of my paper entail that I cannot but be selective in my approach. As already mentioned, only certain aspects of gender are explored and this exploration draws on articles featured mainly in the journals *The Lion and the Unicorn* and *Children's Literature in Education*, and in certain joint volumes.² For the purposes of this essay, I have selected about twenty-five articles, published roughly between 2000 and 2014, which focus on gender-related themes. I am confined to this time span as it seemingly coincides with the high tide in the production of such criticism.³ The sample used was accumulated by selecting articles that cited in their titles terms traditionally associated with discourse on gender such as feminism, boy, girl, queer, feminine, masculine, and the similar. By no means does this sample include all the issues accommodated under the umbrella term gender. Even so I have resorted to this select sample so as to open up a further dialogue based on the hitherto produced criticism on gender. Although the study of gender in children's literature set its own trend in the field—it appeared in the

¹ See Lesnik-Oberstein (1994). *Children's literature: Criticism and the fictional child*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, especially the chapter "On knowing the child: Stories of origin and education-amusement divide," pp. 69-99.

² However, some of my ideas draw on other-gender-oriented academic journals which host articles on children's literature but not on a regular basis.

³ My research in the online database of the journal *Children's Literature in Education*, using as a keyword the term gender, returned 249 articles (including reviews), out of which almost 200 were published between 2000 and 2016. Similarly, the search within the contents of the *Lion and the Unicorn* returned another 340 articles (including reviews).

agenda of criticism from very early on⁴— the criticism itself received relatively little critical attention.

My investigation aspires to serve as a basis for future wider research into the language certain critics of children's literature deploy and points to some of the problematics with which this language is entangled while unraveling some of the implications it carries. In short, my paper is an attempt to deconstruct the construct of gender as this has been approached by certain critics. It might serve as a kind of crude meta-criticism that ventures to serve not as a substitute for criticism but rather as a constant exploration of its own limits and limitations.

Analysis of assumptions

Far from offering a genealogy of the terms critics use, looking for some lost origins, I examine the implications of the language in use and the underlying purposes these critical endeavors seemingly serve. In this light, the notions of classification, representation, mission, and the alleged relation of the author's gender with a similarly gendered readership as well as the interconnectedness of these notions are discussed. The connecting thread that weaves these issues together, as will be shown throughout this paper, seems to be an underlying intention to educate children and young adults into what are seemingly acceptable gender patterns.

First of all, the main idea that underpins the material I examine is that literature is a means of assigning or cementing already seemingly acquired—but never questioned *how* acquired—gender identities: “It is to be hoped that a generation that has grown up reading books that acknowledge a broad range of sexual relationships and gender orientations will be more flexible in the way it recognizes and defines normal and legitimate behavior” (Reynolds, 2007, p. 130). Kimberley Reynolds contends that children's literature that deals with sex and gender issues—what in an evolutionary trajectory of children's literature she labels as radical texts because they touch upon issues once considered taboo—helps adolescent readers recognize normalcy. Yet, according to this critic, for normalcy to be

⁴ See the seminal article by Paul (1990). Enigma variations: What feminist theory knows about children's literature. In P. Hunt (Ed.), *Children's literature: The development of criticism* (pp. 148-165). London: Routledge. Reprinted from *Signal*.

seen/read, it has already to exist prediscursively. It is exactly at this point that there lies a contradiction: the reader either recognizes or constructs, with the assistance of certain texts, ideas of normalcy. However, construction implies that the idea of normalcy does not pre-exist but it is rather in the making within discourse while recognition presupposes a pre-fixed idea of it.

In a similar vein, Perry Nodelman (2008) argues that “a defining characteristic of children’s literature is that it intends to teach what it means for girls to be girls and boys to be boys” (p. 173). The idea of education seems to underpin Nodelman’s quotation as well, yet the problem I see with this kind of education is that it tends to interpret gender in heteronormative terms, thus leaving out a whole spectrum of possible gender identities. In line with the previous critics, Pat Pinsent (1997), writing about what she formulates as “anti-sexist and emancipatory books,” allocates to reading a similar educative role: “The most effective ways to facilitate the progress towards a sense of identity for children of both sexes is through reading well-written and well-illustrated books, which avoid stereotyping characters into gender-roles” (p. 89). Thus, children’s literature, according to these critics, is ascribed the role of a tool that educates child readers into acceptable modes of behavior. Children’s literature then, that is “narrative fiction starts to be assigned a supreme status in the process of education itself” (Rose, 1994, p. 63)—education taken here in its broader sense, not only as formal education provided within school. Thus, the question of gender falls back into the much contested education motive that has always concerned children’s literature critics and reiterates arguments about the socialization of children through the acquisition of gendered roles via suitable “reads.” In this perspective, though, gendered roles are seen as stable, as pre-existent, and the reader has to “discover” them in the text and become a proper subject with “normal and legitimate behavior.” Such an approach is limited and limiting as it either erases or mutes the role of the subjects in constantly creating, negotiating, and enacting gender identities for themselves. It also fails to acknowledge the “overt force” of adults in prescribing to the readers what is expected from them. As Lesnik-Oberstein (1994) argues

Children’s fiction is seen as a means for the maximum facilitation of cognitive and intellectual development with minimum use of

overt force, or is seen as a reflection and expression of a maximum understanding on the part of the adult author and critic of the child as child—of the liberty of child as self-constituted presence (p. 93).

This discussion about or for the education of the child through books that present “normal gender identities” is well fed by a long-standing tradition of *classification* which persists to this day. Classification is sustained by both the critics who look at children’s reading matter from a historicist slant but also by the book industry people who unceasingly look for new marketing strategies to widen their readerships. Critics who align with a historicist approach to children’s literature tend to label literature as either for boys or girls according to genre; this trend is noticeable most prominently but not exclusively in nineteenth century literature for children. Shirley Foster and Judy Simons (1995) in their work *What Katie Read* trace the history of this division back in the nineteenth century by citing the works of Kimberley Reynolds, Julia Briggs, and Gillian Avery, who argued for the rise of a distinctive genre for girls during the Victorian era (p. 2). Similarly, John Rowe Townsend (1990) contended that

For boys there was the life of action on land and at sea: the world of the boy’s adventure story. For girls there was a different kind of fiction considered suitable for the gentler sex [...] (p. 39).

Victorian girls may have yearned for the world of action; but that was not the world they were destined to enter. Boys were expected to develop in a manly way, girls in a womanly (p. 54).

Critics assume that adventure, crime and detective stories were addressed to boys while domestic, pious narratives were the girls’ domain; distinct school stories as either for boys or girls were taken to cater for presumably different tastes. What goes unquestioned in this genre-gender approach is the issue of interpretation and control imposed on potential readers. Readership is specified by those who produce and market texts on commercial and ideological grounds, but this labeling of books as either for boys or girls does not necessarily exclude either of them from their implied readership.⁵

Herein, it seems most relevant to bring in a recent discussion that took place in the British media about ending gender-specific children's books. The campaign "Let books be books," launched in Britain in 2014, sought to disrupt the classification of children's literature as either boys' or girls' reading matter, thus attempting to discontinue a long-standing publishing tradition and a social trend that treated books as both commodities and social engineering tools.⁶ So, what was it that this campaign sought to fight/establish? Its advocates, among them award-winning author Philip Pullman and the former children's laureate Anne Fine, suggested all "signposting being blatantly clear on the front cover" (Flood, 2014b, para 1) be removed so as to prevent prospective readers from being identified by gender. However, gender is not only about labels and colors and other paratextual features on the covers of the book; gender is defined by far more parameters than these advocates seem to take into account: gender is mostly about politics. It is about who decides what becomes of children and young adults and why they do so; it's yet another arena where the "fight" about control and power is staged. Fine, in favor of this campaign, argued how "exasperating" it was that "these false and stupid assumptions about what each gender 'wants' are back in force, narrowing the horizons and possibilities for children of both sexes" (Flood, 2014a, para 1). Fine's statement is discussing the treatment of texts for and about children as thresholds which grant the adults access to "children's wants." She also talks about the possibilities opening up for both sexes, but what sort of possibilities these are and to what ends they are opened up it remains

⁵ Labeling children's books according to genre through "pinking and blueing" (Flood, 2014a) is not a phenomenon confined in the nineteenth century. There are plenty of examples to cite from both the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Consider, for example, the series of *Dork Diaries* by Rachel Renée Russel (2009) or the *Diary of a Wimpy Kid* by Jeff Kinney (2007). I am citing these two graphic novels because although the title in English does not make any direct reference to prospective readers, in the Greek versions I have in mind the translation of the respective titles makes it clear that the first one is addressed to girls while the second one to boys. Therefore, the cultural context not only of production but also of distribution/reception/consumption in a globalized market determines to a certain extent the implied readership. Nancy Taber and Vera Woloshyn (2011) argue that these books reinforce heteronormativity and gender essentialism.

⁶ Townsend (1990) traces this tradition back in the eighteenth century when in 1774 John Newberry brought out his *Little Pretty Pocket Book* which was sold together with a ball and a pincushion, "the use of which will infallibly make Tommy a good Boy and Polly a good Girl" (p. 15). For more examples, see Erica Hateley (2011).

vague. There is an underpinning assumption that children's literature can be read "as a testimony that provide[s] us with authoritative access to 'real children' " (Lesnik-Oberstein, 2011, p. 5).

Critics, writers, and editors in support of this campaign seem to favor gender neutrality in a mode of language already laden with assumptions and configuration processes that dictate certain gender divisions and positions. The advocates of the afore-mentioned campaign attempted to establish a new order "erasing" gender from the cover of the books. However, gender assumptions and perspectives are deeply rooted in language and social practices. No matter how politically correct or liberal claims of "un/gendering" the book may sound, the supposed freedom granted to potential readers is controlled from the outside and promoted as a cause that has to be fought for the benefit of the child reader, as the above quote from Fine clearly demonstrates. But to whose interest? Classification for the above critics is taken to address lacunas of social inequality and to work to the benefit of the child reader, especially of the female reader. The texts under analysis, no matter how problematic my own selection might be, seem "united in terms of an unwavering commitment to the fundamental aim of trying to find the best way to choose the right, or good, book for the child" (Lesnik-Oberstein, 2004, p. 6).

The consistent use of the term *representation* is yet another recurrent issue in literary criticism about gender. The idea of representation is a premise derived from feminist criticism and applied to children's literature in the name of granting children/the young an opportunity to supposedly see, or find themselves in the literature they read. From this slant, a text is either for boys or girls if it happens to depict characters of the respective gender. Critics assume that child readers come to a text because they can find in the text they are just reading a character they can possibly "identify" with. Pinsent (1997) argues that "the reader can experience a feeling of identification with an interesting character of the same sex" (p. 76). Yet, identification, as research has shown, is a slippery term that tends to blatantly homogenize readership and interpretation (Rose, 1994). The premise of representation implies that children have already acquired a gender identity outside the text (how they did this is not explained, though), and then reading material which has been carefully selected and allocated to either gender comes to cement this gender identity, in other words to stabilize it once and for all. Pinsent (1997) also claims that "books which omit fe-

males or only portray them in subservient or limited roles can be disempowering to female readers and are likely simply to confirm the unconscious prejudices of the male reader” (p. 77). In making this claim, Pinsent approaches books as repositories of some outside reality and also claims knowledge of the unknown, since she can “diagnose” the unconscious prejudices of the male reader. Certain critics then, as will be shown more in detail throughout this paper, do not question the possibility of constantly reworking through various gender identities, of taking various subject positions that are yet contained in the same material self.

Furthermore, the idea of representation brings us back to the essentialist fallacy of assuming that texts somehow reflect everyday reality. As the quotes by Pinsent aptly demonstrate, the assumption is that by reading a particular set of texts children will be able to assume the gender identity of the character depicted in the text, namely to acquire characteristics allegedly associated with a specific gender. Claims about the impact of reality representation on gender formation is a consistent feature of much criticism on gender: “Since 1970s, gender analyses of children’s literature have been pointing that the literature for children reflects gender structure of society and helps reproduce it” (Jarkovská, 2014, p. 74) or “literary adventures educate children about what is expected and valued in the real world” (Dickman & Murnen, 2004, p. 373). Yet, according to Jacqueline Rose (1994),

The writing that is currently being promoted for children is that form of writing which asks its reader to enter into the story and to take its world as real, without questioning how that world has been constituted, or where, or who, it comes from. Even if it is not the intention, it is the effect of writing which presents itself as ‘realistic’ that the premises on which it has been built go largely unnoticed, because it appears so accurately to reflect the world as it is known to be (p. 62).

As many articles in our sample point out, apart from claims about reflection of reality, certain critics resort to counting the number of male, female, or ungendered characters in a children’s text, mostly but not exclusively in picture books the term established in late criticism is picture-books as a compact term not picture books as a separate term. In case

we opt for the compact term, we should change it throughout the paper for the sake of consistency,⁷ in order to verify their assumptions about what book matches either readership. In their research MacCabe, Fairchild, Grauerholz, Pescosolido, and Tope (2011) explored the representativeness of gender in a variety of texts intended for children in order to address what they take as an imbalanced depiction of women and men in society:

We focus upon the most obvious markers of inequality—disparity in the representation of male and female characters in titles and central roles—in both award-winning and non-award-winning books to explore how these overt manifestations of bias vary across book types and over time [...]. Differences between the presence of males and females in books have implications for the (unequal) ways gender is constructed. The disproportionate numbers of males in central roles may encourage children to accept the invisibility of women and girls and to believe they are less important than men and boys, thereby reinforcing the gender system (p. 197-198).

As ambitious as their project might sound, what goes unquestioned in their investigation is the assumption that the higher incidence of male fictional characters is going to affect primarily the perception of how women are valued in society, thereby retrieving a real child. In doing so, they read gender in exactly the way they wish to avoid; they treat gender in a commonsensical, naturalized, essentialist, logocentric way that tends to limit the plurality of meaning inscribed in each text and downgrades the child to the level of a receptacle to be filled with “correct” (“unbiased”) ideas about gender. In this perspective, children once more are seen and treated as objects, awaiting their investment with correct ideas about whatever happens to concern the critics at the time they are producing their critical responses. Thus, criticism of this line naturalizes gender as a fixed entity by dictating

⁷ See, for example, the article by Hamilton, Broaddus, and Niehaus (2006). Gender stereotyping and under-representation at another point we use the same word without a hyphen; shouldn't it be the same throughout the paper? See on page 13 where I have highlighted in red of female characters in 200 popular children's picture books: a twenty-first century update, which employs once more statistics to verify sexism against females in picture books. For a further critique of this positivist social science approach refer to Clark, Kulkin, and Clancy (1999).

to children how females and males *are* and *behave*.

According to MacCabe et al. (2011), “Not showing a particular group or showing them less frequently than their proportion in the population conveys that this group is not socially valued” (p. 200). Counting then, in the hands of some critics, qualifies as evidence either for the alleged improvement achieved with regard to gender representation or for the equally unproved assumption of lack of progress. The increase in the number of female characters as protagonists or “the recuperation of otherwise obscure or ignored female authors” (Thacker, 2001, p. 4) are taken to indicate a move forward, a progress and a disruption of male/masculine/patriarchy dominance. Roger Clark (2002) argues about this point as follows:

While in the late-1960s Caldecott female characters were much more likely to be dependent, cooperative, submissive, nurturing and emotional and much less likely to be independent, competitive, directive, explorative and active than male characters, by the late-1990s Caldecotts, there had been a dramatic reversal on every single one of these behavioral traits except for explorativeness. Thus, counting can be used not only to point out a problem but also to indicate progress (p. 290-291).

However, Clarks’ conclusion about “counting that shows progress” stands in stark contrast with the research conducted by Hamilton et al. (2006) in the mid-2000s: “We explored sexism in top selling books from 2001 and a 7-year sample of Caldecott award-winning books, for a total of 200 books. There were nearly twice as many male as female title and main characters” (p. 757). What these quotes point out is that books with the “right proportion” of male and female characters, somehow—although the means by which this is to be accomplished remains unexplained—will “educate” children as to their gender identities. Therefore, the idea of representation and counting, as a verification of the former used to prove the existence or lack thereof, is closely linked with the idea of education and the idea of adult altruism towards under-represented gendered characters.

The discourse hosted in these texts implies that what counts in constructing gender identities through literature is “showing,” in other words visibility of various gendered and sexually orientated characters, such as female, lesbian, queer, transgender, gay or bisexual characters. By implication

then, the issue at stake for critics such as Hamilton et al. (2006), Crisp and Hiller (2011), and Jarkovská (2014) becomes to overcome underrepresentation in books for children, an overcoming which in turn opens up avenues towards parity and egalitarianism; in short, it solves the problem. “With attention to the persistent problems inherent in children’s picture books, parents, teachers and librarians can choose selectively for balanced portrayals of gender roles until the time when authors and publishers provide us with such balance” (Hamilton et al., 2006, p. 764). Likewise, Crisp and Hiller (2011) conclude their article by pointing out that

This study ultimately makes it clear that there is a need for wider representations of diverse gendered identities in all children’s literature [...]. Awarding the prestigious Caldecott Medal to books that provide wide-ranging depictions of what it means to self-identify or resist identification as ‘male’ or ‘female’ may work to position readers to acknowledge the existence of the range of people who represent gender in all its complexity (p. 210-211).

Another “solution” that this representation-favoring feminist theory offers is children’s books “*though rare*, that [...] offer [their] readers an awareness of their own autonomy [are] more powerful at combating the restrictions of stereotyping, offering for instance, the possibility of taking the *best of the feminine and the masculine*, resulting in an androgynous apprehension of the self” (Thacker, 2001, p. 5).⁸ For Deborah Thacker, books as a node of the best of femininity and masculinity—yet without unflashing what is considered to be the best of each gender—result in an androgynous self, that is, in a heteronormative approach to gender. However, as argued by Judith Butler (1990), gender roles include by far more than mere representation. Acquiring a gender identity is not only a matter of being shown gender identities; it is also a matter, partially if not exclusively, of performativity. According to Butler (1990), “gender proves to be performance—that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to pre-exist the deed” (p. 25). Therefore, becoming a gendered subject

⁸ The emphasis is made by the author.

rests on what a person does in relation to the gender identity they are acquiring. Herein, I am quite conscious of using the progressive to highlight an ever-on-going process, one that denounces stabilization of gender and bespeaks an endless reweaving of gender identities.

Closely linked with the idea of representation and classification is the L(esbian) G(ay) B(isexual) T(ransgender) Q(ueer/uestioning) (LGBTQ) children's literature, a relatively recent genre that emerged for the sake of "non-normative sexualities" (Crisp, 2009, p. 333). "I believe that literature reflects society to a certain extent, so understanding whether and how LGBTQ characters are included and portrayed in books in general and in children's books in particular might reveal how society thinks about LGBTQ people" (Epstein, 2013, p. 17). Heteronormativity, the binary oppositional identities male vs. female has been the order of the day, the measure for normality or deviance. Therefore, the production and circulation of the LGBTQ adolescent literature serves, according to certain critics, as a legitimization of diverse gendered/sexed identities by revealing hidden identities and giving voice to the muted, the silenced. Lucie Jarkovská (2014) contends that "The authors of these books, *William's Doll*, *Oliver Button is a Sissy*, *10000 Dresses*, *King and King*, *And Tango Makes Three*, attempt at the subversion of dominant gender structures and/or try to reflect their own experience or the experience of children whom they know e.g., from stories of homoparental families" (p. 75). But is this the case? Does representing, showing other identities equal to forming a gendered identity other than the binary male/female? Or does there lie a well-disguised core of heteronormative values that still pervades these allegedly new identities?

Critic Lesnik-Oberstein (2010) in her exploration of queer theory argues that certain critics depart from the idea of the child as "known and knowable" (p. 315) and invest the figure of the child with a division between the "normal" and the "queer" child, the latter lying in the zone of the unknown. The implication therefore is that queer children's literature will render known the queer child, which thus will no longer pose a risk for the adults' perception of the world as they have already known it. I contend that alternative queer identities are presented mostly in essentialist terms, with the heroes depicted as being and not as constantly becoming the ones we read about. Besides, the issue of gender is sometimes approached jointly with that of genre: some genres are more apt for serving better the society's interests with regard to gender, thus reiterating the tru-

ism that literature can serve as medicine/palliative to vices, problems, anxieties. A case in point would be the exploration of gender and sexuality in some horror fiction books for children:

Horror may function in a “reactionary” manner, publishing transgressions of conventional gender roles and reinforcing stereotypes, or it may function to subvert existing structures of power located around race, class, gender and sexuality [...]. Bellair’s trilogy is usefully understood as an exploration of the period’s fears and anxieties related to gender and sexuality” (Heinecken, 2011, p. 119).

Accordingly, Corrine Wickens (2011) argues that:

Authors of contemporary LGBTQ novels appear to be as equally aware of the potential impact of their books on their audiences. As a result, studying these texts for the ways they enact and engage with ongoing discourses around sexuality and gender helps effectively trace these cultural shifts and their impact on future generations (p. 162).

Although gender-concerned literature is presented in the above texts as a progressive move, the education motive and the role of benefactor granted to the adult reader such fiction “with a potential impact on future generations” part of a conservative politics that assumes full knowledge of the child.

The idea of representation therefore brings us to the idea of politics; in my view, it is not so much a matter of who is represented as it is of how persons are represented. Is there a single gender identity for women and men or persons who do not define themselves as such? Gender is used by children’s literature critics as an analytical category with a fixed meaning as if gender does not cut across other categories such as race, religion and social class, to name but a few. Gender is treated as a stable feature of one’s own subjectivity, which once acquired accompanies people forever. In the name of plurality, equality, and liberal politics some critics favor books that depict different gender/sex identities, whether they be male, female, transgendered or queer characters, supporting the notion that children should

encounter in the literature they read whatever they happen to experience in “real” life. Therefore, literature for these critics is a tool that should mirror “real” life so as to justify their everyday experience and serve as a verification of it: “[Our] purpose is to locate spaces in Caldecott Medal winning picture books in which there are possibilities: where individual readers may be able to see mirrors of themselves or images of people who are present in their lives” (Crisp & Hiller, 2011, p. 200). This oft repeated argument in children’s literature criticism tends to blur the boundaries between fiction and real life. Characters in the book count as real people, as if they were not the outcome of palimpsest readings, these being the author’s readings and the various readings of a text by radically different readers at different moments. Also, there is the underlying assumption that gender is merely given to children and the subjects do not have any involvement in enacting gender identities for themselves through various acts of performativity.

This very gender identity is constituted via *language* and as such by implication it is confined within the limits that language poses. Some critics have gone so far as to introduce new signifiers for the ungendered characters depicted in books for children, yet this very gesture of overcoming the limits language poses serves as closure to what one is trying to avoid. By naming the subject, you already create a gender identity for it, whether it is a he, a she, or a “ze,” a term lately coined to describe gender identity other than male or female in the name of respecting the rights of all humans. The example of the pronouns he, she, or the neologism “ze” illustrates that language in terms of gender homogenizes the myriad identities that come under “he” or “she” or, for the sake of political correctness, “ze.”

Another issue that underpins much criticism on gender is the *mission* motif. Adults in their manifold roles in respect to childhood (parents, teachers, caretakers, librarians, writers, editors, booksellers etc.), have, according to Crisp and Hiller (2011), a mission to accomplish:

As academics, teachers, librarians, caregivers, and interested adults, we must continue the difficult work of recognizing our own assumptions about gender while guiding people in their own critical explorations of how literature and media work to establish what it means and looks like to self-identify in gendered ways (p. 209).

In my own reading of this quotation, I see a hierarchy established; the adult is going to prescribe gender to a growing human being and dictate to the child what it means to acquire a certain gender identity. The adult assumes the role of the masculine without questioning the very processes by which these adults themselves came to be or are indeed becoming gendered. Speaking of serialized westerns featured in the *Youth's Companion* at the turn of the twentieth century, critic Laura Apol (2000) posited that “they [...] provide late-twentieth century readers with a window into some of the lessons in Western womanhood and manhood that were regularly conveyed to children growing up early in the century” (p. 63). Thus, literature, according to this critic, serves as a gendering tool for both boys and girls and acts once again prescriptively. Some critics even support the teaching of queer identities by “reading queerly”: “We can acknowledge that queerness flourishes in children’s texts without permission, without sanction, even without recognition. The challenge we face is liberating that queerness from the heterosexism that polices our reading—both silently, to ourselves, and out loud, together” (Huskey, 2002, p. 74). It is a challenge to read queerness and subsequently “teach” it to children assumes that the above critic is able to recognize queerness even though the latter is registered in the text “without recognition.”⁹

The issue of mission is most noticeable with regard to the females or the ones whose identity does not fall within the binary construct male/female; it is the author’s duty to help these persons become seen and heard in society. Angela Hubler (2010) argues that “fiction that reveals female oppression and offers constructions of femininity challenging traditional ones can be a powerful resource for girls seeking liberation from patriarchy” (p. 57). Herein, the author is seen as a messiah who is going to do justice to social categories that are regarded as disempowered. In the same line, Thomas Crisp (2009) argues that “*Boy Meets Boy* is a novel with a clear mission: It hopes to serve as an intervention, a tool for activism. On the one level, the attempt is effective at momentarily disrupting categories of “male,” “female,” “gay,” “straight,” and “queer” (p. 341-342). Similarly, Brett Epstein (2013) “diagnoses” that “right now is a time when many

⁹ See the article of Renée DePalma (2014) on teaching gender diversity via the UK project, *No Outsiders*, targeted at primary school pupils that ran from 2004 to 2008.

*transgender children*¹⁰ are taunted or otherwise made to feel uncomfortable at school when they consider or attempt suicide, or when they see no hope for the future” (Epstein, 2013, as cited in Smulders, 2015), implying that certain texts will ease the life of these children. Yet, despite arguing for the opposite, critics take for granted that one *is* of a particular gender—no matter which gender—and that one does not acquire a certain identity by various dialectical social processes at different times in one’s life which can constantly be changing into something else by reweaving it through various channels of conscious or unconscious acts.

The relationship between the author’s gender and the particular construction of gender in texts for children is another theme pertinent to much children’s literature criticism. According to Pinsent (1997), the survey on gender conducted at Roehampton University in 1996 revealed “a strong tendency for male authors not to choose female protagonists, though female writers show more willingness both to write about males and to use a mixed cast of focal characters” (p. 76).¹¹ The assumption is that there lies a straightforward relationship between the author’s gender and the construction of gender in the texts these authors produce. It is also assumed that somehow the writing of a particular female author, usually a canonical figure, may have a magical impact on girl readers who, motivated by their readings, will acquire new gender qualities:

[...] Alcott, as the most important contemporary American author to write books specifically for girls, was instrumental in defining, shaping, reinforcing, and revising the qualities, interests, and aspirations of the girls who comprised that market (Wadsworth, 2001, p. 19).

With regard to author’s gender, Carina Garland (2008) argues that the case might be when a male author is going to construct a female identity to portray it in negative light or load it with masculine features whereas

¹⁰ The emphasis is the author’s so as to stress again the presumption of certain critics that children come to a text with an identity that is already recognizable, stable, fixable, and knowable to the expert adult critic.

¹¹ The survey looked at the number of male and female protagonists in a selection of books published in Britain from 1990 up to the time of the research.

a female author is expected to be more sympathetic with her fictional counterparts: “Essentially, female sexuality is reviled by Carroll whereas female passivity is idealized: [...] Alice is desired and controlled by the male gaze. It is important for the male author’s control to be acknowledged so that a feminist reading of the texts can take place” (p. 37). “This empiricist emphasis on the sex of the author” (Moi, 1985, as cited in Green & LeBihan, 2000, p. 245) depends on the fallacy that the sex of the author and their gender cohere, thus creating an arbitrary connection between female and feminine, and male and masculine. Besides, the idea of the interconnectedness of the author’s gender with “truthful gender constructions of fictional persons” concerns not only the binary male/female but also LGBT young adult literature: “The Lambda Literary Foundation is dedicated to raising the status of openly lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans people throughout society by rewarding and promoting excellence among LGBT writers who use their work to explore LGBT lives” (Crisp, 2011, p. 93). Such formulations do not do justice, as they may have wished to, to different child gender identities; they rather tend within this allegedly “different” category to generalize as if all children are one and the same; they argue for division, difference, and plurality but implicitly they either bespeak sameness or attempt to regulate gender/sex identities by rendering them commonsensical and visible, and therefore malleable.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed the motifs of classification, representation, misgender, and the alleged correlation between the author’s gender and the gender of fictional characters as well as that of (any) potential readers. It has also attempted to show how these seemingly unrelated notions converge as the impetus of education on altruistic grounds on behalf of the adult who seems to be the thread that connects them within a coherent narrative about gender and sex. I contend that criticism of children’s literature on gender is yet another ideological apparatus—by no means neutral—where societal expectations for the “reproductive futurism of the Child” (Edelman, 2004, as cited in Crisp, 2009, p. 336) are constantly re-inscribed or renegotiated so that these expectations, even if they argue for differentiation and plurality, become the Norm and are inevitably rendered commonsensical to the degree that in due course they are taken as “natural.”

Drawing on diverse critical texts on gender and to a lesser degree on sex, this paper has discussed some of the assumptions gender/sex in children's literature is based on and has shown that the child, children's literature, and gender in children's literature are unstable, progressive, and performative. Gender in the articles I have discussed becomes the theoretical premise upon which rests the assumption of the importance of children's literature as an educational tool for "dictating" to children their gender identities, for engendering gender in order to avoid endangering stabilized, normalized, and naturalized notions of children and childhood.

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