"They're closin' up girl land": female masculinities in children's fantasy

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The relationship between drag or cross-dressing and traditional gender roles is notoriously complicated. Recent scholars have explored the performative nature of gender, while also noting that this knowledge does not somehow free humans from its elastic, but none-the-less binding power. When children are added to this discussion, it gets even messier. Our culture presumes some relationship between gender roles, sex, sexuality, sexual behavior and sexual orientation. Since children are engaged in the violent processes of learning gender, and close to the experimentation this often entails, they may be more aware of gender as a learned system. Yet because culture hopes to shield children from sexuality, especially "deviant" sexuality, any gendered behavior which somehow references sexual behavior is considered anathema for a young audience.

Children's and young adult literature both responds to and contributes to the messy territory surrounding gender. This article explores one specific, proliferating sub-genre of this literature: books in which girls occupy the roles or bodies typically reserved for boys. In order to lay out the terms, theories, and attitudes of my analysis, I turn briefly to a more recent instance of gender role violation--the video in which Joe Jonas channels Beyonce, and dances to her hit "Single Ladies." As I write this introduction, The Jonas Brothers has the bestselling album in the USA, and clips from this video have appeared in every possible media, viewed by every conceivable age group. Joe makes no attempt to "pass" as Beyonce. He is white and male, wears no drag makeup or breasts, and the video opens with Joe and his brothers engaged in banter about what is about to happen. Victoria Flanagan, in her detailed study of cross-dressing in children's literature and film, claims that male cross dressing typically serves as "a comic strategy to confirm hegemonic masculinity within a context that denigrates femininity, homosexuality, and transgender subjectivity" (Into 203). Flanagan contrasts this pattern with narratives of female cross dressing, in which the message is often that gender roles are too restrictive and should be challenged and disrupted (Into 100). Joe's video, popular during the summer of 2009, presents male cross dressing and masculinity as more messy and conflicted than it looks in the earlier texts Flanagan works with. Comments on YouTube and other public websites frequently note that the dance proves conclusively that Joe is gay, but adjacent comments observe that his dance is sexy and fun. Still others comment that it is another attempt to deliver sexual content to little girls under the guise of innocent entertainment.

Joe's body, seen dancing in a skin-tight body suit, is a male body on display. One effect is, then, to reinforce traditional gender roles. He looks panicky and overwhelmed at times, emphasizing his "real" distance from the role he is performing. Yet he lip-syncs the words, does the moves, wears the heels. In 2009 a male pop star can risk acting gay... maybe even deliberately court it. Joe is doing this video "for the fans" because it got the...

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