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Femininity, Masculinity, and the Tomboy: Gender Behavior in Enid Blyton's *The Famous Five*

PROFESSIONAL PAPER

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The Famous Five book series is a staple of children's literature. Yet, there is a serious lack of academic criticism regarding these books. Somehow, Enid Blyton has mostly slipped through the cracks of contemporary gender studies in literature. It is my aim in this paper to compensate for this by examining gender behavior in the novels, focusing on the interplay between femininity and masculinity in the two female protagonists, Anne and George. Gender appears all-encompassing but can be analyzed methodically using various approaches within gender studies and feminist theory. Post-structuralist feminism deconstructs the notions of femininity and masculinity, which enables an exploration of how and why they are used in society. During the twenty-year period (1942-1962) in which Blyton was writing her series, femininity and domesticity were propagated as the ideal for women. This was done in order to reformulate British national identity: harmony between the genders metaphorically represented harmony in the nation. In the novels, this socio-political background is implicit but undeniably present. Gender behavior is only accepted and approved by others when it naturally follows from sex: girls are only allowed to be feminine and boys masculine. Therefore, Blyton subscribes to the essentialist understanding of sex and gender, which unites the two into an inseparable entity. The books are especially hard on the tomboy character, George, who is sometimes seen as an example of a subversive gender identity. I argue that this is certainly not the case, as George is repeatedly punished for her incorrect and inappropriate gender behavior.

KEYWORDS
femininity, masculinity, tomboy, gender studies, feminist theory, The Famous Five

Introduction

No literature is as powerful as children's literature. That is, children and young adults are remarkably impressionable, and literature can shape their opinions and beliefs in ways it cannot do later on in life. Part and parcel of children's literature is the construction of gender. No book can truly escape this topic, though it can place varying degrees of emphasis on it. A worldwide famous book series such as Enid Blyton's *The Famous Five* has influenced the interpretation of (in)appropriate gender behavior for hundreds of readers. Therefore, it is not only worthwhile but in fact necessary to analyze the novels' portrayal of gender.

The Famous Five book series, comprised of twenty-one installments, was published in England from 1942 to 1962. The series stretches over a twenty-year period of British history, from the height of World War II through the so-called post-war period and beyond. The books, however, are adventure stories for children and make no mention of their turbulent historical background. In each volume, four children (Julian, Dick, George, and Anne) and one dog (hence the famous *five*) embark on a new adventure with its own perils and outcomes. The fictional world created in the books seems separate, if not entirely disconnected, from its historical reality.

That is not to say, however, that the book series, and more importantly its portrayal of gender, are not profoundly influenced by the novels' socio-political background. This influence, which might seem invisible, is present in the form of "implicit ideology," that is, "in the form of assumed social structures and habits of thought" (McCallum and Stephens 360). It is precisely when a social theme is present but not mentioned explicitly that it can have a substantial effect on children: it seems familiar and ordinary, something that can be taken for granted (McCallum and Stephens 360).

For example, while gender is an important aspect in the relations between characters in *The Famous Five*, societal assumptions and rules regarding gender behavior are never brought to the forefront or questioned. Consequently, they are invisible and so appear omnipresent and natural. It is my aim in this paper to make these rules visible by analyzing gender behavior in the novels. I focus specifically on the two female characters, Anne and George, and how their appropriate or inappropriate gender behavior is connected to the socio-political context of the novels. I argue that the portrayal of the tomboy character, George, is far less subversive than it may appear at first sight.

The Construction of Gender

There is never an easy way to start with gender. As numerous critics have pointed out, gender permeates our society and everyday existence to the point

that it seems inescapable and ordinary (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1, Lorber 13). In other words, all of us have our own ideas about gender, including how it is constructed and how it plays out in society. Gender studies aim to provide a systematic analysis of gender in literature and beyond. Even within this academic field, however, there are various and even conflicting approaches. Toril Moi summarizes Julia Kristeva's description of three types of feminism, which correspond to different approaches within gender studies:

> (1) Women demand equal access to the symbolic order. Liberal feminism. Equality.
> (2) Women reject the male symbolic order in the name of difference. Radical feminism. Femininity extolled.
> (3) Women reject the dichotomy between masculine and feminine as metaphysical. (Moi 128)

While all three types listed here would be necessary for a transformation of society in a truly feminist direction, both Kristeva and Moi emphasize the downsides of liberal and radical feminism (Moi 128-129). Only the third approach, also known as post-structural or deconstructive feminism, questions the very nature and construction of binary categories such as masculinity and femininity (Moi 128). In order to do so, a post-structural analysis begins with the difference between sex and gender.

It is commonly accepted within gender studies that sex is of biological and gender of cultural origin. In other words, sex is something we are born with, but gender is something we learn and acquire over time with the help of parents, peers, and the media (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 8, Lorber 17). On the other hand, an essentialist interpretation characteristic of liberal and radical feminism conflates sex and gender to a certain extent: it posits that men and women have *essential* or inherent characteristics that distinguish one sex from the other, which explains why different genders are necessary (Eckert and McConnel 22). For example, essentialist approaches might claim female and feminine mean the same thing or follow from one another naturally, but post-structuralist analyses will not (Moi 123).

When femininity and masculinity are seen as independent of sex, they can be understood "as a set of culturally defined characteristics" (Moi 117). That means each entails a list f characteristics that are then ascribed to that concept. Since these characteristics are always the opposite of one another, in other words "binary oppositions" (Moi 124), we refer to them as gender binaries. For example, masculinity equals activity, strength, courage, virility, and rationality, while femininity is passivity, weakness, timidity, submission, and irrationality (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 22). Moi, as well as many others, point out that there can be no true equality within gender binaries, since one concept is always the more valuable and more valued of the two, as is the case with the

characteristics ascribed to masculinity (124). Consequently, when masculinity is seen as a biological result of being male, and femininity of being female, men are understood as superior to women.

(In)Appropriate Gender Behavior

The strong ties between sex and gender are especially obvious if we consider the idea of appropriate and inappropriate gender behavior. A renowned gender theorist, Judith Butler, problematizes the "*unity* of experience" and "casual relation" that ties together "sex, gender, and desire" (*Gender Trouble* 22). She proposes a rethinking of gender construction that reimagines gender as an ongoing process rather than a "seemingly seamless identity" ("Performative Acts" 520). Not only does Butler reject any essentialist interpretation of gender, she goes one step further by claiming that gender is "performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (*Gender Trouble* 25). Put plainly, it is not that gender creates *us*, it is *us* who create gender. Butler links gender to "acts:" we are like actors acting out our gender; gender is a performance ("Performative Acts" 522). Similarly, Judith Lorber refers to masculinity and femininity as a "social script" (27).

What happens if we do not stick to this script, or if we do not act out our gender appropriately? When women are supposed to be inherently feminine and men masculine, those who cross these rigid boundaries become examples of "incoherent" identities (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 17). In other words, women who are masculine and men who are feminine cannot and are not allowed to exist, because they upset the supposedly natural connection between sex and gender. This is why, Butler goes on, "those who fail to do their gender right are regularly punished" ("Performative Acts" 522). In this context, doing our gender right means acting out the right social script: for a woman, this would mean acting out the characteristics associated with femininity. If she acts out masculine characteristics instead, she is doing her gender wrong, and is likely to be punished for it in some way. For example, she might be ridiculed, shunned, or even physically assaulted. Even if we create gender ourselves, we are still only allowed to perform the gender attributed to us on the basis of our sex.

Gender and Society

There are reasons why these constraints are placed on gender behavior. Gender does not exist in a vacuum: the reasons *why* we are allowed to perform one gender and not the other lie in the status of gender as "a social institution" (Lorber 30). As such, Lorber asserts, gender "has social functions and a social history … It is produced and maintained by identifiable social processes and built into the general social structure and individual identities deliberately and

purposefully" (35). In other words, Lorber stresses the societal function and social importance of gender. The specifics – for what purpose gender is used and why – change according to time and place. Nevertheless, as long as gender is of use in a particular society, there will exist rules, written or unwritten, concerning how it should be performed.

These rules regulating gender behavior depend on what West and Zimmerman call "institutional arrangements" (qtd. in Lorber 25). To uncover how these institutional arrangements affect gender in *The Famous Five*, gender behavior in these novels must be analyzed in the context of their socio-political background. The Second World War is usually hailed as a time of women's emancipation. It is true that more women entered the workforce during this period than between the wars or in World War I (Ward 47). While this might have been accepted behavior in a time of crisis, the same cannot be said for the post-war period. Quite the opposite: "The 1950s saw an attempt to re-establish domesticity as women's primary occupation" (Ward 50).

The new emphasis on women's domesticity was intentional and meaningful. Its primary aim was to "restructure British national identity" (Ward 50). This project relied on women reverting to femininity, which in this case entailed becoming obedient housewives who take care of household duties and their family. The number of women entering the workforce threatened the national project, so the role of literature and other media like women's magazines became to propagate the appeal of domesticity and femininity for women (Ward 50). Paul Ward explains how the nation was reconstructed as a family unit: "Masculinity and femininity were 'restored' in harmony within the home, in turn aiding national unity" (Ward 51). The harmony created by the gender binary signaled that the nation, too, was a harmonious unit. National identity and unity were becoming increasingly significant after the two World Wars as Britain was facing migrations from parts of the former British Empire (Ward 51).

Gender Relations in *The Famous Five*

The Famous Five series might make no explicit reference to its socio-political background, but the relationship between the two most important adult characters, George's parents Fanny and Quentin, perfectly symbolizes the kind of harmony in the home Britain was striving for at the time. This is how the readers are first introduced to Uncle Quentin (as he is called by the other children who are all George's cousins): "He was a very tall, frowning man, a clever scientist who spent all his time studying" (Blyton, *Treasure Island* 5). He is the perfect example of masculinity: strong, intellectual, and rational. His wife, on the other hand, gardens, cooks and prepares meals, washes up, and takes care of the children. She is the role model of the caring and dutiful housewife.

Family life revolves around Uncle Quentin and his desires and needs; most frequently, he demands that the children be silent so that he can work in peace. His somewhat violent outbursts when the children are not quiet are approvingly reframed and normalized: he is just a fierce man and his wife warns the children that he should not be interrupted while doing "such important work" (Blyton, *Demon's Rocks* 19). His wife's concerns, on the other hand, are petty and unimportant to him: he makes it clear, on numerous occasions, that domestic affairs do not concern him (Blyton, *Demon's Rocks* 4). Their relationship, then, is built on clear gender binaries as well as patriarchal hierarchies. Not only are their personalities and activities presented as being naturally different, they are also *valued* differently.

Similar gender binaries and hierarchies are visible within the children's group. The eldest, Julian, is strong, reasonable, inventive, and active. He is responsible for the others and acts as their leader, which everyone around them, including the other children, readily recognizes (Poynter 89). His younger brother, Dick, is more or less his exact copy, and slowly becomes the "second-lead" as the book series progresses (Poynter 90). George and Anne, the two girls who will be analyzed separately, can participate in the action if they wish, but cannot truly take initiative.

Appropriate Gender Behavior: Anne

Anne's behavior perfectly aligns with all the characteristics associated with femininity. She is presented as timid, passive, weak, and irrational (Poynter 90). Often, she is the only member of the group who is frightened and does not want to participate in the action. When she does, she needs reassurance and comforting: "Anne slipped her arm through Julian's. She felt rather small and scared" (Blyton, *Treasure Island* 54). Her ideas and feelings are regularly dismissed or even elicit derogatory responses from others. When Anne confesses she is scared that the lighthouse they are staying at will get blown away in the storm, Julian explicitly labels her fears as irrational: "Dear Anne, use your common sense!" (Blyton, *Demon's Rock*s 128).

If Anne is either dismissed, rejected, or put down when she tentatively tries to engage in the action, the situation is quite the opposite when it comes to her fondness for domestic duties. Anne is very committed to "'playing house,'" which includes cooking, cleaning, and preparing the food for others (Blyton, *Camp* 65). As a consequence, she increasingly misses out on exciting adventures, but seems happy with her newfound role. The young girl's preference for domesticity is approved and even praised by others:

> "What are we going to have?" "We've unpacked some bacon rashers and tomatoes," said Anne, who loved cooking. … "I say, did we pack a frying-pan?" "Yes. I packed

> it myself," said Anne. "Do go and bathe if you're going to. Breakfast will be ready before you are!" … Anne had fried big rounds of bread in the fat, *and the boys told her she was the best cook in the world. She was very pleased*. (Blyton, *Camp* 25; emphasis added)

It is important to note that Anne's choice of cooking over adventures is not, in fact, simply a matter of personal preference. Liesel Coetzee claims that "even though [Anne] appears to conform to dominant discourses that restrict the role and behaviour of women, Anne is emancipated because she uses her freedom to choose" (15). This type of liberal feminist reading renders the societal function of gender invisible. It stresses the notion of personal freedom without taking the socio-political importance of gender behavior into account. Even Anne herself recognizes that domestic activities are gendered. She ties housekeeping duties explicitly to women and femininity when she says: "I don't expect boys to tidy up and cook … but George ought to because she's a girl" (Blyton, *Wonderful Time* 25).

Anne clearly understands that housekeeping is a responsibility assigned to women; she might even believe women are inherently better at it than men. When she plays at being a housewife for the group, she is emulating the behavior of adult women around her. At a time when domesticity was advocated as women's primary goal in life, this was seen as gender-appropriate behavior. Being a good *housewife* equaled being a good *woman*, that is, performing femininity correctly. Therefore, when Anne is participating in gender-appropriate activities, she is doing her gender correctly and is praised for it. Sadly, whether or not she truly enjoys cooking is insignificant as long as this activity is intrinsically linked to gender and in turn socio-political circumstances.

Inappropriate Gender Behavior: George (the Tomboy Character)

While Anne is the epitome of femininity, George's character is much more ambiguous. George is a tomboy: she has short hair, does not dress like a girl, refuses to be called by her given name (Georgina), and overall does not care about any feminine toys or activities (Blyton, *Treasure Island* 16). Jack Halberstam describes tomboyism as "an extended childhood period of female masculinity" (5). Since female masculinity refers to masculinity present in a female body, it breaks the seemingly natural continuity between sex and gender (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 17). A surface level reading might interpret the inclusion of such a character as subversive in and of itself. Whether this character will truly be subversive, however, depends on the way it is treated in the narrative.

Halberstam explains how tomboyism usually appears quite harmless: it "tends to be associated with a 'natural' desire for greater freedoms and mobilities enjoyed by boys" (6). George, for example, prefers climbing, swimming, and

sailing to playing with dolls or dressing up (Blyton, *Treasure Island* 17). Additionally, masculinity is more highly valued than femininity, which means aspiring to be masculine is understandable and might even be presented as desirable (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 24). But such desires are not without their limits: when tomboyism becomes a sign of "extreme male identification," tomboys are punished (Halberstam 6). Identifying as a boy may include dressing up exclusively in masculine clothing and refusing to be called by a feminine name (Halberstam 6). These tomboys are on the verge of inappropriate gender behavior, and, as Butler points out, "[p]erforming one's gender wrong initiates a set of punishments both obvious and indirect" (Butler, "Performative Acts" 528).

Overtly, George's masculinity is invalidated and ridiculed by other characters, who seem to acknowledge it only to please or entertain her. After the two get in a minor argument, Anne explicitly tells George that her brothers Julian and Dick are "real boys, not *pretend* boys, like you" (Blyton, *Treasure Island* 16; emphasis added). George's father, Quentin, calls her *Georgina* when he is angry or displeased with her and *George* when he is proud of her (Blyton, *Treasure Island* 159). George is often mistaken for a boy because of her masculine appearance. When this happens in front of the group and George feels satisfied, this is how Dick replies: "'You only liked him because he was ass enough to think you were a boy … I don't believe that boy thought you were a boy at all. He was just sucking up to you. He must have heard how much you like *playing at being what you aren't.*'" (Blyton, *Kirrin Island Again* 56; emphasis added)

George is also punished for her gender transgressions in subtler and more complex ways. Elizabeth Poynter points out how George's behavior and personality are frequently described with negative adjectives and adverbs (90). Consider how Aunt Fanny first describes her to Anne: "George hates being a girl, and we have to call her George, as if she was a boy … [t]he *naughty* girl won't reply if we call her Georgina" (Blyton, *Treasure Island* 13; emphasis added). The word *naughty* implies misbehavior. George is presented as stubborn and irritable, and her incorrect gender behavior as troublesome and childish (Poynter 89).

An encounter between George and Mr. Roland, the children's tutor in F*ive Go Adventuring Again*, also encourages a negative reading of George's female masculinity. Mr. Roland, who despises dogs, insults George's dog Timmy in front of her, and George reacts strongly and emotionally (19). Immediately, her response is related to her gender behavior. Mr. Roland refuses to call her George and explains to her cousins that "Georgina has got to be *sensible*, as you three are" (19, emphasis added). By using the word *sensible*, Mr. Roland suggests that George's misbehavior extends to her gender: she is being unreasonable in both her general and her gender behavior. Blyton attributes the same line of thought to Dick and Julian, who are embarrassed thinking of their "silly and difficult" cousin George (19).

Although the group then ostracizes her, George does not give in to the pressure. She confides in Dick, admitting that their behavior is hurting her, and that she believes Mr Roland is a bad person (which is true, as he ends up being the main villain of the novel). Dick, however, sides with Mr Roland: "'You're silly, George … You haven't really got a Feeling – it's only that Mr Roland will keep calling you Georgina and *putting you in your place*, and that he doesn't like Tim. I dare say he can't help disliking dogs'" (26, emphasis added). Again, the situation is unequivocally linked to George's incorrect gender behavior. Mr. Roland is *putting George in her place* by refusing to comply with her wish to be called by a masculine name. Therefore, masculinity is not George's rightful place: she is performing her gender wrong.

In light of all this, it is difficult to imagine how Coetzee can read George's character as a plausible, positive alternative for girls who do not wish to be feminine (2-3). George is continuously and consistently punished for her gender behavior by both adults and her friends. Additionally, what Coetzee reads as evidence of Blyton's sexism, namely her portrayal of boys as superior to girls, is in fact the juxtaposition between masculinity and femininity (2-3). Blyton complies with the essentialist notion of gender as a natural consequence of sex. Or, as Julian clarifies to George: "You may look like a boy and behave like a boy, but you're a girl all the same" (Blyton, *Hike Together* 29). In other words, if George is capable of masculine tasks and activities and is praised for them, it is only because she is acting out masculinity, not because this is a part of her intrinsic abilities as claimed by Coetzee (9-10). Her female masculinity is just a pretense and confirms that Blyton entirely complied with the view of gender-appropriate behavior promoted by her socio-political background.

Conclusion

Even if gender behavior is a performance, we must learn to perform our gender correctly. For Blyton, however, gender is only a pretense when it is done incorrectly: for boys, masculinity is an innate ability, but for girls it is only a fiction. Throughout the course of the series, two clear patterns emerge: the boys are presented as the leaders who are rational, sensible, imaginative, and active, while the girls are sensitive, intuitive, emotional, and irrational. It is made obvious which of the two (masculinity or femininity) is more highly valued, as well as who are the only ones who are allowed to act it out. Blyton's novels offer no radical rethinking and reimagining of gender, not even when it comes to her tomboy character, George.

There is another way of looking at this. Coetzee minimizes Blyton's role and involvement in perpetuating gender stereotypes by claiming Blyton was simply appealing to her audience and what they expected of her character's gender

behavior in order to sell more novels for her own financial gain (6). This argument could be applied to any author, or in fact any person who has done something potentially harmful to others. How many young girls and tomboys read these novels and were discouraged from pursuing their own sense of gender identity? We will never know, but if we do not hold authors accountable for their writing, the possibility of genuinely subversive literature will diminish and soon cease to exist.

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