Growing-up Drag: Cross-Dressed Heroines in Young Adult Fiction

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“D’you think I want to be a lady?” his sister asked. “Walk slowly, Alanna,” she said primly. “Sit still, Alanna. Shoulders back, Alanna.” As if that’s all I can do with myself!” She paced the floor. “There has to be another way.” (Alanna: The First Adventure 1)

The critique of gender norms must be situated within the context of lives as they are lived and must be guided by the question of what maximizes the possibilities for a livable life, what minimizes the possibility of unbearable life or, indeed, social or literal death. (Butler, Undoing Gender 8)

This article explores the way female-to-male cross-dressing in two young adult fantasy novels —The Song of the Lioness by Tamora Pierce and The Monstrous Regiment by Terry Pratchett — queers the
process of growth and girlhood. Gender and sexual ambiguities that already underwrite the process of adolescence and coming of age are further complicated by cross-dressing. The cross-dressed warrior girls in the two texts offer an interesting literary study as their transgendering opens a space to critique the cultural divisions along the female/male as well as homo/hetero axis. It not only undoes the female/male binary but also challenges sexual categories, which are often situated along the divisions between heterosexuality and homosexuality.

The implications for the culturally constituted gender roles are complex and yet easy to read. By masquerading as boys, the protagonists gain freedom and liberty that is inaccessible to them as girls; the masquerade becomes a temporary time and space wherein the limitations of socially prescribed gendered roles can be transcended.

At the same time, the figure queers the ‘naturalized’ patterns of sexual growth. Most children’s and young adult literature endorses the dominant cultural perception that “children are (and should stay) innocent of sexual desires and intentions. At the same time, however, children are also officially, tacitly, assumed to be

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1 Gender and sexuality figure prominently in the discourses surrounding adolescence since adolescence, by its very definition in most cultures, depends on biological puberty and the accompanying cultural assumptions regarding the age at which adult responsibilities, including marriage and parenthood, can be undertaken. At the same time, adolescent sexuality is frequently marked by discourses of abnormality, pathological states of raging hormones, and deviance.