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Performing Spectacular Girlhood:

Mass-Produced Dressing-Up Costumes and the Commodification of Imagination

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This research, using an extensive sample of mass-produced dressing-up costumes aimed at pre-school and infant school girls, examines the breadth (and narrowness) of imaginative roles available on the high street. Utilising object-based methods of analysis alongside theories of performativity, childhood, consumption and gender acquisition, this article explores how gender is produced on the body through the performance of clothing. Despite the designation of imagination and play as 'natural' states of a 'natural' child, the penetration of the commercial dressing-up costume market into these realms promotes a legitimisation of stereotypical gender and creates restrictions on the possible imaginative identities available for girls. Tackling issues of 'knowingness' and agency, this article argues that the extent to which young children can imaginatively and playfully engage with material culture is necessarily limited by the reinforcement of cultural scripts and brand narratives literally woven into the fabric of the clothes that they are given.

INTRODUCTION

This article investigates mass-market dressing-up costumes for girls in order to identify the feminine roles such outfits make available for fantasy play and to question whether the performance of these roles enacts and thus creates femininity. Using Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity alongside theoretical texts on gender acquisition and childhood as a category, this research explores how girlhood is produced on the body through the performance of clothing. An object-based reading of the design characteristics of an extensive dressing-up costume sample—which reveal common cultural fantasies and depict a spectacular femininity—is matched with critical material that examines the uptake of gender norms in young children. In order to interrogate the popular notions of what is deemed culturally appropriate for the role-play of girls, theories of play and dress, and discourses concerning prevalent themes relating to the child in history, from innocence to sexuality, are explored. The implications of the commercialisation of play, and the effects of consumption and bought identities on the child's imagination and self-conception, are also considered. The tension between social agency, 'knowingness' and the pleasures of the child on the one hand, and the regulating and compulsive pressures of normative gender on the other, run through the whole investigation.

CONTEXT

Scholarly studies of both childhood and consumption have expanded since the 1990s and there is now a substantial body of literature connecting the two areas of study.¹ An emerging body of research also exists in relation to children's clothing.² Childhood, according to much recent scholarship, is a culturally-specific and highly constructed phenomenon, loaded with symbolic value, and increasingly shaped, if not threatened, by the rise of the ever-increasing 'children's culture industry' of

toys, games and clothes.³ Cook, a key commentator both within and on this area, has noted that much of the literature on children's consumer culture tends to take one of two positions; what he describes as an 'either/or' debate. Noting that discussions of childhood are always 'hypermoral', Cook suggests that, on the one hand, there is significant concern about the increasing intensity of marketing towards children and the consequent corruption of the apparent sacredness of childhood. On the other hand, especially in contemporary sociological and anthropological studies, children are frequently regarded as 'agentive social actors' with the capacity to 'creatively appropriate culture, including consumer culture, rather than having it imposed on them.' Cook observes, however, that the latter view is no less moral than the former, as it posits creativity, 'knowing' and the power to choose as a new kind of sanctity, stating that:

Despite the spoken and unspoken cultural promises that unfettered consumption allows for self-creation and brings personal satisfaction, there is a lingering suspicion and concern that corporate ingenuity, sophisticated market research and the lure of the televisual can overwhelm even the most savvy child consumers.⁴

This becomes particularly complex, as I will show, when the goods are themselves marketed using sacralised discourses of imagination and play. The ability of children to unpick and negotiate market narratives and codes is further problematised in the case of younger children as consuming subjects. Cook poses two key questions that remain unanswered in existing studies of children and consumption. He enquires, '...at what point along the early life trajectory can it be said that children come to discern and thus to have a 'choice'?' and, similarly, '...when does parental arbitration end and a child's volition begin?'⁵

Although this research cannot claim to provide answers to these questions, the study of dressing-up costumes aimed at girls in the three to eight year old age

group, that is, of pre-school and infant school age, necessarily opens up issues of agency that are distinct from the bulk of studies into children's culture that tend to focus on 'middle childhood' (c. 6-11 years) or, increasingly, upon the pre-adolescent or 'tweenage' years (c. 8-12 years).⁶ Martens, Southerton and Scott have observed that children in research are often treated as a homogeneous social group and little attention is paid to the diversity of experience, knowledge, abilities and agency that comes with age.⁷ The authors also observe that limited critical attention is paid to consumption that takes place on behalf of children, and suggest that more attention needs to be paid to the role of the parent in the study of consumption. They note that, 'children can act as symbolic representations of their parents' cultural orientations and attitudes.'⁸ The 'gatekeeping' role of parents, who control and thus legitimate most purchases of goods and services, inevitably limits the consuming autonomy of the younger child.

Using survey methods to compile a comprehensive garment sample and an object-based methodology for reading the dresses' design characteristics, this research explores issues of agency, knowing and performance in relation to the symbolic capacity of young girls' fantasy clothing.⁹ While the wearing of fancy dress by children is clearly not a new phenomenon, and the mass-production of these fantasy identities is also long established, the growth of the contemporary children's clothing market aided by cheap Asian imports, and the rise of character merchandising, means that such costumes have achieved a newfound prevalence.¹⁰ Numerous recent commentators have observed the increasing 'pinkification' of clothing and objects aimed at younger girls as a symptom of the increasing retrenchment of gender, or as Natasha Walters has described it, 'the new determinism'.¹¹ While the association of pink with female children is itself historically recent,¹² its associative dominance is such that recent studies have attempted to argue that girls' preferences have a biological basis.¹³

There is, of course, an extensive body of critical literature concerned with the phenomenon of gender acquisition, particularly in relation to girls, that

intersects, at times, with the role of clothing in gendered self-presentation, although the material qualities of the clothing tends to be sidelined, if addressed at all, in such studies.¹⁴ Cognitive science has produced a wealth of studies that attempt to answer questions about sexual difference;¹⁵ indeed, it has been claimed as 'one of the most researched topics in psychology'.¹⁶ Although studies remain split between those who claim the genetic hardwiring of gender as 'innate' and 'inherent' and those that claim such studies as 'neurosexism',¹⁷ arguing that social expectations about gender have effects from the moment of birth (and even before), there is some consensus that enduring models of sex-role theory and socialisation need to be rethought.¹⁸ Perhaps the most influential of theoretical texts that consider the making of gender are those by Butler.¹⁹ This research examines the particular claims Butler makes for performativity as a normative, reiterative practice, in relation to clothes that are, in themselves, costumes for performance. By examining the extent to which 'knowing' is available to the children at whom the garments are targeted, and the extent to which the imaginative capacity of children can override the gendered and branded narratives (repeatedly) woven into the garments' design, this research raises questions as to how identity may be shaped by material things.

THE RESEARCH SAMPLE

The costume sample, upon which this investigation is based, comprises all the mass-produced dressing-up outfits available to girls in high street shops retailing children's clothes and toys in Brighton, East Sussex, England, during December 2003. A total of 52 costumes was studied, across the following eight shops: Adams, Argos, British Home Stores, The Disney Store, Early Learning Centre, Girl Heaven, Marks and Spencer and Woolworths, situated in either Churchill Square Shopping Centre or Western Road, Brighton.

The study focuses on the specific gender implications of girls' costumes alone, as these dominate the marketplace and have a broader range than the much smaller market for boy's costumes. Dressing-up costumes that could be considered gender-neutral were rare—the sole exception being a sheep costume for sale in Woolworths' nativity range. The Early Learning Centre promoted its fire-fighter, doctor and police officer costumes via gender-neutral language, yet the company also marketed these outfits in opposition to the princess and fairy costumes in a clearly gender-differentiated manner in their shop display, through the easily readable gender signifiers of colour (for example, pink versus black), and accessories (walkie-talkies versus handbags). Girl Heaven also sold simple tabard-style police and fire-fighter costumes, which contrasted sharply with the main body of their stock, not least in the respective monochrome or primary colour schemes of those costumes in a shop overwhelmingly dominated by silver, white and all shades of pink. It was not clear if the police and fire-fighter costumes—lacking the complicated tailoring, gloss and sparkle of the rest of the shop's clothing—were intended for girls, as the shop's name implies, or whether they were on sale to provide an extension of the shop's popular dressing-up and party supplies. Due to their uncertain status they were not included in the sample.

Children's dressing-up clothes are available from a variety of different sources, including independent fancy dress suppliers and shops selling joke and party supplies. However, in order to ascertain the most popular design styles and dominant characters available for children's costumed fantasy play it was necessary to examine the most readily available and mass-produced items, such as those available in multiple chain stores commonly found in British high streets. The eight shops chosen for this study represented all the chain stores selling dressing-up costumes in the main shopping streets and mall of central Brighton during the Christmas period. The shops chosen marketed their children's dressing-up clothes in a variety of ways. The Early Learning Centre and Argos sold their dressing-up clothes amongst toys as play equipment, and Marks and Spencer, British Home

Stores, Adams and Woolworths all sold their costumes within their children's clothing ranges. The Disney Store marketed only Disney-related merchandise, and sold its costumes amongst other character-themed toys, games and accessories, in support of the promotion and sale of the films from which the characters originate. Girl Heaven sold costumes as part of its larger range of accessories, cosmetics, gifts and 'make-over' services. The status of the dressing-up costume is multiple, variously functioning as toy, film merchandise, role-play equipment, and party wear. The sample of all available costumes sold in the eight high street shops provides a representative document of the breadth (and narrowness) of the popular fantasy identities marketed at girls during the period and helps to identify the most popular roles sustained across the market. There were repetitions in designs and characters across the shops, and it is these similarities which draw the material together as a text, revealing common patterns that illuminate the deeper cultural scripts.

CLASSIFYING THE MATERIAL

Princesses

The preponderance of princesses and/or Disney characters was notable in the sample, with 14 (27 per cent) of the roles based on princess myths and an overlapping 12 (23 per cent) of the total being Disney characters. The Disney Corporation created, and now owns, the dominant images of the most popular fairy tale characters via the animated film retellings of traditional stories, from Snow White to Beauty and the Beast, which are now marketed through the 'Disney Princess' brand name.²⁰ The enormous popularity of the animations across several generations have helped to fix in the cultural imagination the outfit, facial features and colouring of characters such as Cinderella and Sleeping Beauty who previously did not have a unified appearance in the storybook illustrations that prefigured the films. While The Disney Store itself produces dressing-up costumes in the image of

these trademarked characters, they also permit other retailers to retail merchandise connected with the 'Disney Princess' range under license, and it is this factor, in combination with the multiple designs produced to reflect different seasons' ranges and price bands, that gave Disney characters the lion's share of the girls' costumes sample (Fig. 1).

Disney costumes are sold surrounded by multiple reminders of the relationship between the costumes and the films, amidst a wealth of other merchandise, ranging from magazines and toiletries to confectionery and bed wear. Disney logos and characters are named and pictured on the costumes' swing tags, hangers and sewn-in labels, and sometimes feature prominently on the fabric of the outfits themselves. The brand and characters are further reiterated through the costumes' accompanying shoes, tiaras, wands and other matching accessories. The faithfulness of the dressing-up adaptations to their originating screen image is emphasised by these markers. Although the dimensions of shoe heel height, or the waist-to-hem ratio on a dress, for example, are rescaled for practical reasons to accommodate a child's body and movement, and although the stylistic markers of royal luxury and elegance (such as fur, silk and diamonds) are remade in polyester and plastic for the purposes of producing a cheap, machine-washable costume, instantly recognisable character motifs and signifiers are carried across from animated image to wearable garment.

Magic

Fairy outfits were also well represented. Six costumes, making up 12 per cent of the sample, were named as fairy costumes, although many of the other costumes such as princess outfits and ball gowns, with their pastel-coloured fitted bodices and petal-like gauzy skirts, could easily be made into fairy costumes by the addition of the wings-and-wands sets sold separately in several of the sample shops. Other children's clothes shops that did not stock complete costumes (for example,

Mothercare and H&M) also retailed fairy wing sets and thus demonstrated the popularity of the fairy in the production of mass-produced fantasy identities. Kline has spoken of the toy marketing term ‘the magic years’ relating to childhood up to age eight,²¹ and the director of Girl Heaven stated that he envisaged his shop to be a ‘magical experience’.²² Magical signifiers—tinsel, sparkles, holograms and stars—abound in the material of the costumes, and are repeated at their point-of-sale promotion and in the language used to describe their purpose. Argos’s dressing-up range is entitled ‘Spread a little magic for only £9.99’²³ and Disney has long marketed its films, shops and holiday resorts around a prevailing theme of enchantment. It is no wonder, then, that the majority of roles offered to young girls through mass-produced dressing-up clothes had their source in the popular magic of fairy stories and myths. It is possible to class thirty costumes (that is, 58 per cent) as such, including those in the form of mermaids, witches and angels.

Occupational Roles

In opposition to the mythic roles, the only mass-produced occupational outfits available for girls were the specific health and care-related nurse and beautician costumes. They totalled three (6 per cent). Arguably, the ‘Disco Girl’ costume and ‘Pink Oscar Dress’ from Girl Heaven could be the professional costumes of pop and film stars respectively, as could the outfits of the ballerinas, and, at a stretch, the ‘Cow Girl’ and ‘Arabian Dancer’.²⁴ However, it was only the beautician and nurses costumes that depicted ‘everyday’ occupations, albeit through stylised and/or historicised uniforms: the former’s ‘lab coat’ was rendered in a cinch-waisted pink polyester satin; the white aprons and caps of the latter recall nursing wear not seen for a generation.

Dancing, Marriage and Christmas

There were other significant repetitions of designs and roles within the group. Eleven costumes out of the 52 (21 per cent) related to dancing, with a total of

seven ballerinas, a disco dancer, a belly dancer and two cheerleader outfits. Ten per cent of the costumes relate to the marriage ceremony, with four bride's dresses and a bridesmaid's (the white dress from Adams is included in this count, and also the Girl Heaven 'White Ball Gown' which, while not named specifically as a bride's dress, was sold alongside tiaras, veils and a 'Just Married' sash). Four of the costumes were connected with Christmas and were thus specific to the time of year when the sample was taken. Girl Heaven's Angel and its Christmas dress - which represents a feminised Father Christmas costume—and Woolworths' Angel and Virgin Mary dresses would be unlikely to be on sale except seasonally. Woolworths stocked the Mary and Angel costumes as part of a Nativity collection. It is likely that the named shops stocked an expanded range of costumes during this period, when sales of party wear and children's gifts would be at their height.

Barbie Costumes

The toy character Barbie appears three times in the sample, once as a ballerina in Marks and Spencer, and twice as versions of the principal Swan Lake character, to tie-in with the seasonal promotion of toys and merchandise related to the animated Barbie film of Tchaikovsky's ballet. As a dressing-up doll herself, Barbie does not have a unified dressed appearance that can be easily translated into a dressing-up range, but the development in recent years of the animated Barbie versions of fairy-tales and ballets have provided new merchandising opportunities and also visual material for costumes. In order to differentiate the branded Barbie Rapunzel or Barbie of Swan Lake character costumes from generic princess outfits, Barbie dresses come with the Barbie logo displayed prominently on the garment's centre front. The relationship between the brand and the clothing is further emphasised through their designs, which correspond directly to the shapes, colours, fabrics and details of the matching Barbie dolls that are frequently sold alongside.

Evil Characters

A small percentage (6 per cent) of the costumes represented 'baddie' or evil fantasy characters. There were two black witch costumes, on sale at Adams and at Marks and Spencer respectively, although the latter's costume had the unusual feature of being reversible, so the wearer might choose between 'being' the black, purple and green 'bad' witch and the white and gold 'good' witch on the reverse. The Adams witch costume was reduced in price, suggesting that it was left over from the recent Halloween period, and would not therefore be on sale as a fantasy identity all year round. Girl Heaven sold a vampire dress made from red and black velvet with pointed trailing sleeves. It is likely that this costume too was left over from Halloween, as it is a character closely associated with that period and it was sold alongside familiar Halloween accessories, such as red plastic devil's horns and tridents. The dark colouring of these costumes (and that of a black cat) contrasts sharply with the rest of the sample, where black clothes constitute only six per cent, compared with 14 (27 per cent) predominantly pink costumes, and a further 9 (17 per cent) predominantly white.

Age Range

Most of the costumes covered the age range of three to eight year olds. The Early Learning Centre costumes only came in one size – up to 116cm, or roughly age 3-6, to correspond with their market. All of the Marks and Spencer costumes, and select Girl Heaven and Disney Store costumes, were sized from age two. Most of the costume retailers are restricted to a lower age limit of three years because of the safety guidelines relating to toys with small parts. This avoids compromising the designs of the costumes which frequently include small decorative details such as sequins, rosettes, feathers, flowers and bows. Five of the retailers had age 7-8 as their largest size; Woolworths stopped at age seven. The Disney Store stocked costumes, in some designs, up to ages 9-10 and 11-12, reflecting the wider popularity of its more established characters. Research has shown that older girls'

dressing up is less likely to involve assuming named play characters,²⁵ and that a central concern with the stereotypic signifiers of femininity—such as girls' putative love of pink—is 'time delimited'²⁶ to the years when ideas about gender are at their 'peak rigidity',²⁷ that is, precisely those covered by the main body of the dressing-up costume sample.

Similarities in Design

There was remarkable homogeneity in the costumes' shape and fabric across the sample. Only the nurses, the Native American and the cowgirl characters had costumes that were not made from fabrics that connoted the luxury of velvet, lace and silk. Synthetic velour, tulle and/or satin fabrics dominated the sample at 92 per cent of the range. Whether the role offered is fairy or witch, princess or dancer, many of the costumes featured the same design of a close-fitting bodice and a long, full skirt, often made up of multiple layers, gathered at the waist. In the case of the Adams' witch and princess costumes, the only significant difference between the two outfits was the colour. Pink and black thus became the only signifiers of good or evil characterisation since the shapes and textures of the costumes were the same.

Across the whole of the collection, it is common for the bodice to be held in place by fine straps, sometimes with additional flounces, or with gauzy caps as suggestions of sleeves. Generally, when sleeves are included, they are puffed, if short, and floaty and wide at the wrist, or trimmed with feathers or synthetic fur, if long. Even those deviations from the norm, such as costumes with trousers, sometimes included fitted bodices, gauze and veiling; while others that did not conform to dominant patterns of shape, such as the vampire or nurses' costumes, still featured a wide skirt hem and narrow waist, presenting a silhouette where the fullness of the lower half contrasts with the close contours of the upper body. Similarity in costume design is partly imposed by mass-production imperatives but this does not provide a full explanation. The predominant shape mimics the

instantly recognisable narrow-waisted, wide-skirted, graphic sign for 'Woman'—a reduction of the shape of the female body to the clothes associated with it (Fig. 2).

Despite the few deviations from the norm in the form of minority 'baddie' characters, occupational roles, or costumes with trousers, the emphasis remains on beautiful, luxurious dresses and magical identities in the market for fantasy outfits for girls. Of these dresses, the designs frequently recall styles from previous eras, particularly the eighteenth century, and appear indebted to the style of early illustrated fairy tales, although as a whole they are more generally evocative in a general sense of what Grainge and Samuel would describe as 'pastness' than being traceable to a single historic source, period or style.²⁸ Details such as multiple petticoats, full, swagged and hooped skirts, panelled bodices that descend to a point, suggesting boning, and pagoda sleeves are common features. More than eighty per cent of the total displayed pre-twentieth century dress styles. This historical influence in the costumes' designs emphasises popular notions of childhood as timeless.

INTERPRETING THE COLLECTION

The Nostalgic Child

By dressing a child in clothes that evoke a historical period, it is possible to evoke discourses from that era. As Cunningham has observed of the Romantic period, 'the more adults and adult society seemed bleak, urbanised and alienated, the more childhood came to be seen as properly a garden, enclosing within the safety of its walls a way of life which was in touch with nature and which preserved the rude virtues of earlier periods of the history of mankind.'²⁹ Jenks has observed that late modern society also considers the child as a 'form of nostalgia' and 'longing for times past'.³⁰ Higonnet and Albinson have noted how in historical costume, 'the child's body appears to exist before time began, before experience can begin.'³¹

Holland has spoken of the 'powerful nostalgia' that runs through popular imagery of childhood which, she says, 'refers to a harmonious and comfortable world before industrial civilisation'.³² Despite a now established body of literature on the historical contingency of childhood, the nostalgically constructed child suggests an ahistorical timelessness.³³ As Holland argues, 'in a world dominated by commercial imagery, a child claims to be outside commerce; in a world of rapid change, a child can be shown as unchanging.'³⁴

To appear as a character from a previous era - particularly in the role of a fairy tale character that has been defined and defended in Jungian analysis, and its popular legacy, as a human archetype - entails dwelling in a state of once-upon-a-time timelessness.³⁵ The costumed child can be seen through the 'natural' expressiveness of play to be engaged in an enduring 'natural' activity; that is, exploring a mythic and imaginative interior realm. As Rose has observed, 'myth and childhood belong together, in that myth is so often identified with what is primitive, even infantile, or is seen as a form of expression which goes back to the origins of culture and speech.'³⁶ Warner has also noted children's 'intimate connection' to a 'wonderful, free floating world of the imagination'. She states that 'their observable, active fantasy life, their fluid make-believe play seem to give them access to a world of wisdom, and this in turn brings them close to myth and fairytale.'³⁷ It is no coincidence that the fantasy costumes draw on an imagined past; the projected memory of an idealised history provides an escape from the pressures of the present.

The Sexualised Child

The nostalgia for childhood as an innocent space expressed in the design of dressing-up clothes is complicated by the sexualised designs of some of the costumes. When the girl child takes on a role from the costumes on offer, she must engage with physical self-consciousness, with clothes that reveal or suggest bare shoulders, exaggerate the waist and hips, and imply a bust by cinches and tucks.

The dressing-up clothes are theatrical costumes, coded for visual impact, functioning not just to emphasise the internal characterisation of the child assuming a role, but also to externalise the performance and to announce 'Look at me!' With the exception of hair length and style, a girl child's body between the ages of three and eight exhibits few external signs of sexual distinctiveness, thus clothing plays a key role in gender identity demarcation. Amongst the dressing-up costumes, frills emphasise body shape, while flowers and jewels mark out exaggerated femininity, decoratively inscribing the body as the site of the girl's gender fantasy identity. From tight stretchy trousers and feather trimmings to velour sleeves that approximate long velvet gloves, the outfits in the sample are frequently composed of details from a glamorous woman's wardrobe, sized for the child so she may rehearse the demeanour of the sexually mature female.

A child is posited as the opposite of an adult, and is therefore defined by difference, but the firm boundaries between adult and child can be troubled by gender performance. The crossing of such boundaries can be a contentious issue, especially as feminine physical appearance is so frequently read as synonymous with sexuality, and as sexual knowingness in the child is a contemporary cultural taboo. As Holland elucidates, 'girl children in particular must not be seen to explore sexual knowledge on their own terms. Instead they must *perform* childishness as if unaware of their sexual appeal.'³⁸ Despite the coding of close-fitting velvet fabrics and off-the-shoulder fantasy costume designs, such as the Girl Heaven 'Red Vampire Dress' and 'Disco Girl', Higonnet argues that the sexual messages of adult-style clothing can be bypassed through their performance by a child:

Context overrides content. Contrary to what child pornography laws assert, clothing or behaviour 'inappropriate' for a child's age can look pretty cute, given the right conditions. ...What matters is not whether adult behaviour is pictured, but whether our society promotes that behaviour. When children mimic socially

sanctioned adult appearances, 'age inappropriate' behaviour looks entirely appropriate. This is more, not less, true when children rehearse the adult gender roles we call masculinity or femininity.³⁹

Clearly, gender dress rehearsal can be read as a socially sanctioned activity, even if only on the basis of the volume of dressing-up costumes available on the market, and the complicity of the purchasing adults in directing the play of the children for whom the garments are bought. Holland also writes of the 'elaborate drama in which children perform well-known roles'. She says, 'Girl children in particular are expected to present themselves as an image, and to learn a special sort of exhibitionism in order to act out the charming 'childish' qualities adults long to see.'⁴⁰ When girl children dress as parodies of sexually mature women, with thick make-up, high-shoes and so on, Holland argues persuasively that their childishness becomes more marked by the incongruous juxtaposition of the two opposing states. She says, 'by enacting a femininity which is itself an excessive performance, such an image effectively keeps the concepts of adulthood and childhood sharply separate, even though the symbols of both these states are brought together within the frame of the picture.'⁴¹ Holland also notes, however, that, 'Children are in a double-bind. When they knowingly invite the adult gaze, when their beauty is no longer self-absorbed, and when they deliberately put themselves on display, the result is a loss of innocence and of childishness itself.'⁴² It is the state of *knowingness* that is the contentious issue, then, not merely the act of dressing-up in the style of a grown woman.

The Playing Child

That fantasy play is one of the child's methods of coping with and understanding the world is documented in psychological and educational literature.⁴³ However, James, Jenks and Prout note that, 'while it is clear that play provides the

opportunity for children to rehearse future adult roles and thereby to learn to take on societal affective and cognitive systems...how this occurs is less well explained.⁴⁴ What play does and what play means are ongoing debates. The forms play takes and the way it is defined are bound by social contexts, even in a behaviour that is seen to be the natural state of children: just as childhood is not a historical absolute, so play is equally historically and culturally specific.

Cohen argues that 'the eighteenth century romantic movement rhapsodised play. It was, after all what *l'enfant sauvage* got up to in a state of nature. For the romantics, play and its freedoms were normal.'⁴⁵ In the twentieth century, the enduring influence of Piaget's psychological studies of children at play sets the activity apart from the demands of reality, opposing the spontaneity of play to the compulsion of work.⁴⁶ The continuing depiction of play as natural, spontaneous and unworldly legitimates the status of fantasy as an apolitical area outside of consumption. If childhood and play, then, must be set apart from commerce in order to conform to the conditions we expect of them, the conflict between the prescriptive quality of branded costumes and the non-materialistic quality of spontaneous play may only be eased by somehow assuming mass-produced dressing-up clothes into the category of what is considered natural. Without borrowing authorisation for fantasy from developmental play theory and historical and literary notions of the innocent child, the role-playing of specific commercial narratives, such as Barbie and Disney character roles, would seem to limit the opportunities for creativity in the play of the child. Langer has observed that what she calls 'the children's culture industry' utilises romantic and psychological discourses of imaginative play in order to valorise and naturalise its products. She quotes from the International Council of Toy Industries, which states that, 'Play is critical to the healthy development and well-being of all children, and transcends cultures, ages and time zones.'⁴⁷ Langer observes that such corporate literature 'positions the children's culture industry as a conduit to the world of the imagination: manufacturers of magic'.⁴⁸ She notes, 'The elision of childhood with

play, fun and toys situates toyshops and toy makers as part of the enchanted landscape of childhood, which naturalises and sacralises the children's market.⁴⁹ A child may be theoretically free as a social agent to negotiate its own meanings of objects according to its own experience, but the limits on free play imposed by commercially themed costumes must also be acknowledged, when the brand narratives are literally woven into the garments that the child embodies. At the same time the separation of play from 'reality' renders the imaginative space of childhood innate, natural and unquestionable, allowing any commercial colonisation to then assume the same unchallenged status.

PERFORMING GENDER

A key consideration of the implications of the dressing-up costumes is their relation to the performance and production of gender. Butler's theory of performativity, first outlined in *Gender Trouble*, and later refined in *Bodies That Matter*, describes the way gender is manufactured by discourse and enacted through a series of repetitive performance rituals that suggest an internal, biological and psychological gender core, which Butler argues does not exist. She states:

... acts, gestures and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this *on the surface* of the body...Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means. That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality.⁵⁰

The theory of gender performativity – that gender performances create the gender differences they are illustrating – offers a productive means of assessing dressing-up costumes and the kind of performance, play and behaviour that they encourage.

At the early stages of girls' gender development and identity formation, the social endorsement of stereotypical gendered role-play through the provision and purchasing of highly feminine costumes supports a culturally driven pressure to perform gender norms, even (or especially) at the level of fantasy. The fact that the imaginary and fantasy worlds of the child are seen to be an appropriate site for the legitimation of spectacular extremes of gender characterisation is not insignificant. In the magical, idealised world that is encouraged in the object manifestation of girls' fantasy play, gender roles are rigidly defined as seen in the animated films of Disney or the plastic world of Barbie. Dressing in a state of superlative femininity in order to achieve princess status in a fairy-tale-like play realm visually reiterates the simplified and normative gender binaries that Butler details.

Although Butler's formulations of performativity centre on an unquestioned adult subject, the reinforcing patterns of children's play are recalled when she speaks of the repetition of performed gender identities. She says, 'this repetition is at once the re-enactment and re-experiencing of a set of meanings already socially established; and it is the mundane and ritualised form of their legitimation.'⁵¹ If play is a child making sense of the world, dress-rehearsing adult roles and negotiating given meanings, then at the earliest stages of gender awareness, children engage with the stereotypical roles they see around them and, arguably, find pleasure in fitting into the existing form, for as Butler notes, 'According to the understanding of identification as an enacted fantasy or incorporation ... it is clear that coherence is desired, wished for, idealised'.⁵²

Debates about the agency of subjects, and in particular, children, problematise the cultural determinism of theories such as Butler's performativity, for when discourse is said to constitute the subject, there is little room left for negotiation. Theorists of childhood have argued that 'the child is active in its own

right, not simply imitatively, but as...an agent in its own construction and as naturally an agent as any adult'.⁵³ Sociologists and ethnographers of children's culture also reiterate this through their fieldwork findings.⁵⁴ This role of the child as an active agent in her or his own identity development is, of course, contingent on the possibility of agency in the adult. It was in her book *Gender Trouble* that Butler allowed room for manoeuvre in the creation of gender identities.⁵⁵ However, if Butler denies—as she does in the later *Bodies That Matter*—the possibility of will or influence on the part of the subject, she reduces the imitative uptake of gender to a state precariously close to enforced socialisation, where, by inference, the child can be nothing more than a *tabula rasa* and an apprentice adult, without significant determination in her own right.

In *Theorizing Childhood*, James, Jenks and Prout state, 'how children and young people learn about the social world is through a creative, often transformative engagement with the social and institutional structures of which it is composed. In this sense, children's socialisation and their part in processes of cultural reproduction involve no passive mimicry'.⁵⁶ If there is no passive mimicry in children's negotiation of the adult world, then the dressing-up child can be said to assume an active position in the construction of fantasy gender identities. In *Gender Trouble* at least, Butler perceives what she calls 'gender parody' to be a means of subversion and a chosen transgression.⁵⁷ However, while the girl dressing up as a highly decorative fairy-tale princess may not be acting on the same principles as the lesbians assembling 'femme' identities (to which Butler refers as her central case study), arguably both are engaging in a conscious construction of an idealised, hyperreal gender position. That the desirable imagery of mythical femininity illustrated in the mass-produced dressing-up costumes is at odds with the appearance of the living females the girl is likely to encounter in everyday life, emphasises the fantastical, 'phantasmic' quality of gender stereotypes.⁵⁸ The costumes may reference, say, the eighteenth century, or be based on folk tales, but

the stylised female characters at the source of the image are most frequently fictional fantasies.

The issue of a child's 'knowingness' is also problematic when applying performativity theory to the material of children's dressing-up. The state of a child's self-consciousness and her knowledge of the range of possible gender experiences is limited amongst the three to eight year olds who are the main consumers of the dressing-up clothes studied here. Martens, Southerton and Scott have questioned the age at which children might display 'enough' agency to be studied as autonomous research subjects and note that 'children are not principal players when considering the scripting of cultural and historical understanding of the notion of childhood'⁵⁹ for, after all, adults control and structure young children's lives.⁶⁰ Particularly at the lower end of the age-range, the child's understanding of gendered positions is appropriately simplistic and generally conformist, based on an 'overgeneralisation' of dominant models and on the limited experience the child has acquired.⁶¹ Davies has documented the enthusiastic early uptake of gender stereotypes in *Frogs and Snails and Feminist Tales: Preschool Children and Gender*.⁶² At an age when gender differences are understood by opposing pairs of generalised differences in appearance, such as long-versus-short hair or skirts-versus-trousers, Davies notes the way that gendered clothing is used by small children as the superlative sign of gender in play. She observes:

There are a number of items of dress that are use by preschool children to mark their sex, such marking being a symbolic means of maintaining the sexes as clearly distinct. Generally, skirts, ribbons, shawls, handbags, prams and dollies signify femaleness, and guns, trousers, waistcoats, superhero capes and uniforms such as firefighters' uniforms signify maleness.⁶³

She continues, 'The skirts and trousers are more than superficial dressing....They appear to have a symbolic weight of perhaps equal if not greater significance for the children than the symbolic forms encoded in language.'⁶⁴

In this age group, then, engagement with gendered clothing takes the form of communication of basic gender separations. Ruble, Lurye and Zosuls have also noted that preschool children are aware of the signs and symbols that demonstrate gender designation. As they put it, 'It requires little detective work for children to notice some of the most blatant physical characteristics associated with females: pink, frilly and dresses.'⁶⁵ Davies has observed the resistance exerted by a minority of children in taking up fixed gender roles, yet she argues that the repetition of gendered role-play and gendered clothing has a regulatory effect, 'no matter how much the forms of being that are allocated to the other sex may be desired, subjection to one's own gender will more or less relentlessly take place, since any person who wants to be recognised as legitimate and competent must be appropriately gendered.'⁶⁶ Within these processes of subjection, the desires on the part of many young children to willingly submit to the pleasures associated with conformist gender play must also be acknowledged. As Ruble and her co-authors put it, 'Pink Frilly Dresses are salient and concrete features of "girlness", allowing girls to display and embrace their new identity when adorning themselves in this way. Their clothing demonstrates to themselves and others that they have mastered their gender role'.⁶⁷ The agency of the child, however, must always be set against the wider cultural context of dominant narratives and norms, where gender is repeatedly flagged as an everyday, even common sense, form of distinction. Davies notes that the demarcation of male and female roles 'is embedded in the narrative structures of books and play, in the very discursive practices through which the child's identity is formulated and sustained.' As she states, 'This knowledge becomes embedded in the bodies of the children'.⁶⁸

CONCLUSION

The growing popularity, ease of availability and dominance of a narrow range of branded fantasy narratives in the dressing-up costume market appears to be demonstrative of a desire – on the part of the manufacturers and purchasers – to see girls playing pink princess and glittery fairy roles. Many parents will have observed, and researchers have noted, that the desire for pink, frilly costumes comes from the girls themselves, rather than being a manifestation of top-down passive absorption. Ruble, Lurye and Zosuls have described the phenomenon as ‘a kind of obsession linked to developing knowledge about social categories’;⁶⁹ in other words, a powerful compulsion to perform gender.

What is it that the young girl performs when she dresses in feminine role-play costumes from the high street? If, as Butler claims, we are all incontrovertibly compelled to perform our own gender, then the gender performance of children’s dressing-up would be a secondary reiteration of performativity: girls’ special gender performances would take place within the wider, constant performance. Within Butler’s approach, these exaggerations would expose the fictive and hyperreal construction of gender. However, the issue remains that whether or not the girl conforms to the concept of performativity, her practice of dressing-up is ignorant of the theory.

The motives of the young girl in dressing as a pink princess or glittery fairy are based on the pleasures of appearing beautiful, impersonating popular characters and inhabiting easily-recognisable gender designations through a set of ready signifiers: pink, skirts, glitter, satin. The costumes reiterate what the child has seen—in television, books and film—of female heroines. When glamorous role models with magical powers take centre stage in the media narratives that surround the child, and offer templates for her fantasy life that are supremely, unquestionably and spectacularly feminine, superlative femininity becomes a dress code for the extra-ordinary. The distinct colouring, fabrics and body-shaping

designs of the costumes, their heightened decoration and their distance from everyday wear, announces an exaggerated gender designation for the young wearer, who performs feminine identities—knowingly or otherwise—and thus produces gender signification on the body. As Davies notes, ‘the wearing of dresses is more than symbolic. It is an essential part of the process by which girls learn the meaning of being girls ...dresses mark the femaleness of their wearers but they also act as part of the process whereby femaleness becomes inscribed in girls’ bodies.’⁷⁰

At the level of fantasy, and in the formative years, clothes shape behaviour, just as they do in adult dressing. Dress historians and theorists of material culture have long recognised the affective power of objects on bodies. Banim, Green and Guy, for example, have noted ‘how women *become* the identity conveyed by the image the clothes project.’⁷¹ Davies also notes that, ‘as we discursively position ourselves as male or female, it can be argued, our physical being will follow suit... That is, the idea of femaleness *and the adoption of practices relevant to the idea* has a material effect on the child’s body.’⁷² Researchers such as Davies and Ruble have observed the rigid ideas about gender that early years’ children can hold, and this seems to correspond to what McRobbie has recently described as the ‘hard-and-fast’ new forms of gender difference embedded in girls’ clothes. She complains, ‘It turns small five-year olds into one-dimensional fashion queens, and it narrows their realms of interest, and imagination’.⁷³ With net and hoop, heel and wand, tulle and frill, girls between three and eight may engage with these outfits—at times enthusiastically—to construct their own interpretations of what gender means, but there can be no denial that the tools with which they are provided are limited. That the imaginative roles available to the young girl are so restricted and brand-driven shows that the fantasy realm of the playing child, in spite of its apparently innocent, timeless and natural state, is a powerful commercial site for the performance and production of stereotypical gender.

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Fig. 1

Child's dressing up costume. 'Belle' character from Walt Disney's 'Beauty and the Beast' film, *The Disney Store*. Age 5-6, 100% polyester.

Gold stretch velour bodice with fine straps and central gold lurex ribbon, finishing at a point with red rose decoration. Gold tulle off-the-shoulder decoration from upper bodice to upper arm, with central red rose decoration. Full-length, ruched, gold satin skirt, gathered at the waist with swag-effect hem. Gold tulle decorative swagging at mid-length of skirt, with repeat red rose decoration. White net underskirt with plastic hoop at hem. Over-the-elbow gold stretch sleeves, ending in a point, with red rose decoration and elasticated finger loop. Photograph: Caroline Ellis



Fig. 2

Child's dressing up costume. 'Ball Gown', *The Early Learning Centre*. Age 3-6, 100% polyester.

Pale pink satin bodice with square neckline and puffed sleeves, stiffened with net. Central panel of bodice overlaid with pleated pale pink glitter tulle, trimmed with holographic braid, narrowing at the waist. Elasticated, smocked pink satin to the bodice back. Waistline swagged with pale pink glitter tulle; central pink satin rose decoration with pink glitter tulle petals. Full-length, gathered pale pink satin skirt, overlaid with gathered, ruched and sequinned pink glitter tulle. Pink underskirt with hoop at hem, finished with stiff pink netting; second underskirt of stiff pink netting. Photograph: Caroline Ellis

