This essay is an inaugural effort to conceive of homosexual boyhood. It focuses in particular on a subset of homosexual boys, parodically called “girlyboys,” whose mixed feminine-masculine gender experience moves beyond the conventional categories of masculinity and femininity. These boys have often been cast from the realm of “gender health” through the reluctance of psychologists and psychiatrists to recognize the actuality of gender variance and crossgendered identifications within the domain of mental health. Propelling and commingling with efforts to capture the subjectivity of girlyboys (largely through clinical material) is a discussion of the need for integration in human life. A call is made to retain concepts such as psychic structure and ego integration, and apply them to reimagine psychic developments that are free from the determinisms that psychoanalysts have so readily fallen back upon to account for human development.

The women in my family have a way with needles, and my closet is full of the evidence. Pillow cases bordered with yellow roses patiently crocheted, unfurled, and arranged by my Great-aunt Idie. A quilt pieced by my grandmother, Linnie, using cotton fabric I imagine to have come from summer dresses and kitchen curtains. Embroidered tea towels—one a coolie, his black braid swinging freely, the other a Dutch girl, her blond page boy tight and precise. I don’t imagine my mother, Laura, intended them as a couple, but I like to think of them deep in my closet in the grip of untold colonial transgressions. To bear

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witness, I add an entranced voyeuristic chorus of flannel gingerbread men, snow fairies, and bearded eggshell Santas, Christmas ornaments held together by the most miniscule of my Aunt Margaret’s stitches.

In packing for a recent move, I came across some evidence of my own participation in this matrilineal craft. At the bottom of an underwear drawer I found a handkerchief. In the lower right-hand corner of the white, child-size square, at a jaunty angle in navy blue, I had embroidered “Kenny.”

I immediately looked upon the handkerchief as symbolic: A femme ghost repressed by a brace of butch boxers. A defiant bottom spread out and proud, tempting those “Calvin”-ists. I laughed at my preciosity as I recalled the role of the hanky in the elaborate gay coding schemes of the 1970s. I laughed again when I remembered that Tom in Tea and Sympathy earned the moniker “sister boy” when caught in the act of sewing with a group of faculty wives. As my thoughts circled around this artifact, I began to recall making the
handkerchief, and with those thoughts, I began to contemplate my boyhood, or more precisely, my girlyboyhood as it threaded its way through my homosexualboyhood.

I embroidered the handkerchief sitting between Idie and Linnie on the porch of my grandparents' farmhouse. They cross-and chainstitched, while my 7-year-old fingers fumbled with the most basic running stitch. Along with the handkerchief, I seem to remember something about embroidering a teapot cosy, though no one in my family drank tea. But then again none of the other boys took up needles. What was it that I was looking for as I sat sewing with my grandmother, or at a later date as I embraced candle making with my mother? (The snowball variety made with whipped paraffin were our personal favorites.) After all, domestic craft was not supposed to be the realm of boys.

Sitting amid the rubble of packing, not unlike the rubble of a dream, my thoughts turned to where I more often sit as a psychologist listening to patients tell me about their homosexual boyhoods. While contemplating various aspects of their experience, I began to consider what the psychological canon has to say about homosexual boyhood. It was then that I realized there is no “homosexual boyhood.”

Homosexual boyhood as a conceptual category does not exist. The existence of protogay boys has until now either been silenced or stigmatized. Bullies identify sissies. Psychiatrists identify sissy-boy syndromes. There has been virtually no effort to speak of the boyhood experience of homosexuals in any way other than to characterize their youth as a disordered or nonconforming realm from which it is hoped they will break free. The fate of these boys is contemplated with the kind of hushed charity that obscures antipathy.

My wish is to break through the hush, reject the charity, and begin to conceive homosexual boyhood. To that end I hope to use Nick, a 10-year-old participant in Green's (1987) longitudinal study of sissies, as my fanciful guide. When asked if he knew why he had been brought to a doctor, Nick proclaimed he had “a big, fat, girly problem” (p. 277). His sassy is a welcome relief from the glum tut-tutting that pervades the sissy-boy discourse, and ultimately contributes to the production of a dispirited theory of homosexuality—and here I refer in particular to the works of Green (1987), Stoller (1968, 1985), and Friedman (1988). I am using “sissy-boy discourse” to refer both to the literature on sissies and the literature on gender identity disorder (GID). I focus primarily on the literature about sissies, but will also reflect on the GID discourse, notably the work of Coates (Coates, Friedman, Wolfe, 1991; Coates, 1992, 1994).

Guided by Nick, and by the spirit of parodyically reclaiming oppressive signifiers, I would like to add “girlyboy” to the queer nomenclature. It is nearly impossible to locate a signifier for male homosexuality that does not either scapegoat women, flowers, or fruit. Consider the following list: swish, nelly, fruit and its derivative fruitcake, pussy, pansy, fluff, sissy, Nancy, Molly, Mary, and Mary Ann. Perhaps it would make more sense to rebelliously appropriate “sissy,” and repeatedly and defiantly invoke its linkage with pathology, indictment, and scorn. But “sissy” carries the implication of weakness, unbecoming delicacy, and enervation, devoid of the possibilities born of resistance, agency, and action. Moreover, “girlyboy” captures the quality of category crisis that is essential to the boys I am attempting to describe. As a patient of mine commented, “I never believed I was a girl, but I had trouble believing I was a boy. You only have two options, after all. So how do you decide?”

A girlyboy’s gender experience does not just reverse the traditional feminine-masculine binary, it goes further to destabilize these familiar
gender signs. The oxymoronic coupling of girl and boy in “girlyboy” captures the possibility that there may be forms of gender within homosexuality that contradict and move beyond the conventional categories of masculinity and femininity. The manner in which gender’s necessity may give way within homosexuality prompted Freud, as early as 1920, to characterize the relation between a homosexual’s gender attitude and mode of sexual satisfaction as the “mystery of homosexuality” (p. 170). For homosexuals, according to Freud, maleness did not necessarily correspond to the activity analysts associated with masculinity, and femaleness did not necessarily correspond to the passivity that was linked with femininity. Sharing Freud’s sentiment and expanding upon it, a friend of mine recently described a woman she had just met as “butch on the streets, femme in the sheets.” The butch-femme takes Freud’s mystery and redoubles it.

But rather than draw on the mystery of homosexuality to open up the categories of gender, analysts, beginning with Freud, have repeatedly restricted the possibilities of gender to the conventional heterosexual masculine—feminine binary. Homosexuals have thereby been repeatedly (dis) located within a theory of gender that rests on essential distinctions between what is feminine and what is masculine. Through this categorizing, analysts uphold the inevitability of a cultural order established through such reasoning. But as the homosexual’s experience exemplifies, such logic results in a sanctioned cultural order that does not sufficiently problematize the experience of gender. This so-called logic has effectively silenced any consideration of homosexual boyhood outside the realm of pathology. Nick’s cross-gendered identifications and gender variance become a “big, fat, girly problem,” as opposed to a manifestation of gender’s vicissitudes.

I have argued elsewhere that, due to countertransference difficulties with male homosexuality, analysts have often neither comprehended nor tolerated the gay man’s experience of gender (Corbett, 1993a). A similar lack of recognition and comprehension can be noted in the sissy-boy discourse. In the presumed service of mental health, analysts have been so eager to bring girlyboys back into the masculine fold that they have often lost sight of them. Not only that, but analysts have also lost sight of the actuality of gender variance and cross-gendered identifications within the domain of mental health.

As my starting point, I argue that this analytic blind spot is fostered by a failure to adequately appreciate the complex and mysterious relationship between gender and psychic structure. I argue that gender conformity and psychic structure have been blurred into what I call “gender health.”

This blurring of psychic structure and gender is further promoted by an undertheorized notion of masculinity. Within the sissy-boy discourse, gender is as gender was; virtually no effort has been made to critically theorize gender. As such, this discourse bears the mark of a kind of generation gap—an old auntie tuning out the queer rap of postmodernism, feminism, and gay studies. To advance my argument I employ feminist, queer, and postmodern critiques of gender. But at the same time, I question whether such contemporary thinking does not at times overlook life beyond the pleasure principle and in so doing underestimate the human potential for both psychic pain and psychic growth.

In recognition of the preliminary nature of my efforts to conceive homosexual boyhood, I have organized the latter half of this paper as notes on girlyboys. It is my hope that presenting this material in the form of notes will afford me greater freedom, while appropriately
conveying the preliminary nature of my efforts. The note form—unfettered by an essay’s demand for sequence and reason—seems more in keeping with the subjectivity I am attempting to capture. It is witless to be

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1 Throughout this paper, I employ the concepts of psychic structure and ego integration to express various ideas about the need for integration in human life. My use of the concept of psychic structure follows on the work of Loewald (1980). My use of the concepts of ego integration, emotional development, and health follow on the work of Winnicott (1965) and Masud Khan (1974). I maintain, in league with these theorists, that internal worlds are created and psychic structures are built through processes such as internalization, projection, introjection, and identification—these internal worlds are not simply inner worlds, schemata, or maps that represent the external world of objects and their relations. Further, following on Winnicott (1965), I correlate successful ego integration with health as opposed to disintegration which I link with dissociation, chaotic states of regression, splitting, and depersonalization. The term *ego* has become something of a four letter word in these postmodern times. As I see it, ego has earned its damned status through guilt by association—the manner in which the ego has been associated and implicated in psychoanalytic developmental theories that prescriptively enforce what Dimen (1995) has called “the regulatory force of the idea of the ‘normal’” (p. 135). However, normal is not inherent in the concept of the ego. I believe we can and must revitalize concepts such as psychic structure and ego integration, and apply them to our efforts to reimagine psychic developments that are free from the determinisms that psychoanalysts have so readily fallen back upon to account for human development.

**Gender Health**

I want to make it clear at the outset that there are multiple homosexual boyhoods and that I am not speaking about all homosexual boys. Conversely, I am not excluding all heterosexual boys—or girls, for that matter. I want to speak about homosexual boyhood as distinct from heterosexual boyhood without minoritizing and without denying the manner in which homosexual and/or cross-gendered fantasies are interimplicated with a range of sexualities. I have chosen within this paper to focus on girlyboys—a frequent set of experiences and fantasies shared by many homosexual boys, but not exclusively and not exclusive to them. This pattern of experiences and fantasies is open (as are all patterns) to considerable inter-and intrasubjective variance.

I also want to be clear that in constructing these prospective developmental narratives concerning the cross-gendered experience of proto-gay boys, I am not claiming to put forth a developmental line, nor setting out a coherent narrative that forecloses the complex interimplication of gender, sexuality, and psychic structure. Instead, I am proposing that early cross-gender experience is neither isomorphic with homosexuality (Friedman, 1988; Coates, Friedman, and Wolfe, 1991),

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2 Given what seems to me to be the inevitable consequence of parody—the possibility that in treating a serious subject in a nonsensical manner, one risks trivializing or minimizing the importance of the subjectivity at hand—I find that I have second thoughts about employing this label. As I argue in the body of the paper, I believe that it would be silly not to be silly in this paper. But this manner of play should not be mistaken for a lack of respect or serious regard for the men and boys discussed here. The fact that “girlyboy” is a label is worthy of doubt in and of itself. Labels denote categories, and I am reluctant to advocate for yet another category. Moreover, it is just the sort of category that implies yet another binarism. In other words, if there is a girlyboy, is there a boylyboy? I hope, however, that I have made it sufficiently clear that I chose *girlyboy* because I felt it succeeded in capturing the complex interimplication between masculinity
and femininity that so many homosexual men describe. It is this interimplication that I hope to illuminate and explore within this paper; the label is in the service of that project. In this world, many things are named but few are described, and while this name will fail (as do all names) I hope the description, or at the very least the effort of the description, will in some measure succeed.

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nor conversely a causal developmental sequence from crossgendered experience to adult homosexuality (Zugar, 1988). But rather, early cross-gendered experience is interimplicated with later developing homosexuality in complex ways that remain unaccounted for within current developmental theories. There are, I believe, aspects of homosexual development that call for a theorization that moves beyond the developmental paradigms psychoanalysts now employ. As opposed to a deterministic developmental paradigm, we are in need of a developmental theory that can account for pattern while simultaneously duly noting the role of variance, and even chaos, in psychic structure and health.

Many gay men have femme ghosts in their closets, many do not. And for those who do, the vigor of the ghost varies between these men and within any given man. Gender appears to play a more important role in some lives than in others. As Sedgwick (1995) has recently commented, “Some people are just plain more gender-y than others” (p. 16). Along similar lines, some theories are more gender-y than others. I want to emphasize that my effort to examine cross-gendered identification is one way to think about homosexuality, not the only way, and not necessarily the exemplary paradigm for thinking about homosexuality.

One could question this paradigm, as does Schwartz (1995) when he asks why I “worry about men having feminine identifications” (p. 122). The answer, as I see it, lies in the attribution of worry. Men and boys are made anxious when characterized as feminine, the shaming implication being that they have lost hold over their proper gender (Butler, 1993). The misogynist heart of homophobia beats with such anxiety and shame. In an earlier attempt to both understand and resist such homophobic regulation and shaming, I set out to locate the gay man’s experience of gender within the category of masculinity (Corbett, 1993a). Calling a feminine man masculine has a certain radical appeal to me. I argued that calling gay men feminine neither sufficiently problematized their experience of gender nor adequately captured the vicissitudes of gender. I suggested that male homosexuality could be seen as a differently structured masculinity, not a simulated femininity—that the feminine identifications and so-called feminine desires

3 I am indebted to Adrienne Harris for her thoughtful discussion of an earlier version of this paper in helping me to clarify my thinking on this matter.

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(namely, passive longings) that many gay men experience could be held within a masculine identity. I was seeking to expand and destabilize the psychoanalytic construct of masculinity by including passivity and feminine identifications within its borders. I believed then, as I do now, that challenging the construct of masculinity holds forth both liberatory and conceptual potential.

However, in a striking demonstration of the manner in which hierarchies have a way of insidiously reinstating themselves (Flax, 1990)—the way in which the gender hierarchy of masculinity as superior to femininity repeatedly reinstates itself—and despite my efforts to the contrary, my position has been read by Schwartz (1995) as a revisionist apologia for male femininity. The implication of such a reading is that through an unknowing complicity in oppression, I wish to promote masculinity as health, while demeaning
femininity. Through my efforts to assist gay male patients in clarifying their own distinct gender experience, including feminine identifications, it is my wish that they will then be able to reassess and revalue their own identity, choosing to identify themselves as they may. The patients to whom I was referring would, I believe, if pressed, call themselves masculine.

More to the point, however, the men I was describing would attempt to avoid gender categorization altogether. Queer people can feel unnamed within a gender matrix that is founded on certain ideals of heterosexual masculinity and femininity. Recognizing the inherent dilemma in trying to classify himself, a gay male patient commented, “There was this sense of otherness. You know, not being the norm—not the normal boy. But I don’t know, I feel like civilization has robbed me of the words to describe this.” Such sentiment illustrates that however destabilizing my earlier effort to describe gay male gender as masculine may have been, such a move fails in the same way that describing gay male gender as feminine fails. Neither categorization sufficiently captures the experience of gender otherness these men and boys describe.

The category problem reasserts itself with regard to the relationship between gender and sexuality. A hallmark of gay politics has been the effort to resist and deconstruct the long tradition of looking upon gender and sexuality as continuous categories. Gay activists and theorists alike have labored to reject developmental theories of sexuality, especially those that position gender as the causal determinant of sexuality.

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The political efficacy of such resistance notwithstanding, I have long wondered about the psychological efficacy of this tactic. I fear that in our quest to freely question and deconstruct sexuality we have thrown the queer baby out with the utopian bathwater. Gay theorists have long ignored the link between boyhood femininity and adult homosexuality, thereby dislodging childhood gender experience from adult sexual identity,closeting the feminine boy, and creating a “haunting abject” (Sedgwick, 1993, p. 157) of our gendered past.

I do not believe that queer hope and resistance need to be radically divorced from what may be developmental aspects of gender and sexuality. It is no longer enough to deconstruct developmental paradigms and prescriptive norms. As Butler (1993) has suggested, we must now begin to construct models that theorize the complex interimplication, as opposed to causal implication, that unites gender and sexuality. We need now to recognize the multilinearity and interimplication of psychological process that is born of gender’s and sexuality’s intertwining (Goldner, 1991; Harris, 1991; Butler, 1993; Chodorow, 1995; Dimen, 1995). For example, while children establish a conscious gender identity before they develop a conscious sexual identity, we should not assume a linear and hierarchical relation therein. We should, however, begin to entertain the dynamic intertwining (including the possibility of an untwining) such developments may have with one another. Further, as Chodorow (1995) has recently suggested, we need to recognize the ways in which “the ‘solution’ of gender problems involves the solution of general problems of personal subjectivity and capacities for intersubjectivity” (p. 297). Likewise, Goldner (1991) has argued that “personhood, gender identity, and relationship structures develop together, coevolving and codetermining each other” (pp. 261-262). Hence, the extreme difficulty in making generalized statements about gender, because genders are as infinite as subjectivities. Yet our psychological needs for ego coherence and stability push toward such generalizing and sense making, pushing in consort with (while simultaneously constructing) cultural injunctions.

I strive to conceive of my patients as intricate beings, beset by contradiction and paradox. I like to believe that we are capable of complex fates that are too often underestimated by the developmental parameters set forth by traditional ego psychology. However, I also
strive to understand my patients' needs for stable self representations and

bounded subjective coherence—including their quest for stable gender and sexual identities. This need for stability does not preclude underlying contradictions. And likewise, the underlying contradictions do not preclude the need for stability. Recognizing the ego’s stabilizing function should not be confused with a reification of convention; indeed, convention can be defensively employed to impersonate stability.

The Problem of Effeminacy

While I argue that all boyhood femininity is not the same, I do not wish to reify the manner in which male femininity has been looked at from the perspective of a continuum—from more to less femme—with the more femme end of the continuum linked with greater ego deficits and character pathology. This notion of continuum is made explicit by Friedman’s (1988) assertion that the number of “homosexual men who are entirely masculine (by usual cultural standards) increases as the level of global character pathology decreases” (p. 93). In other words, according to Freidman, the more a man is like a woman (the more a boy is like a girl) the more pathological he is likely to be.

Another expression of this femme continuum is the separation of gender identity disorder from what is termed “gender nonconformity.” Boys who are identified as having a gender identity disorder are depicted as extremely feminine and severely distressed. Boys who are identified as nonconforming are seen as less problematic, both with regard to their femininity and their mental health. One could look at the manifest behavior of GID boys as opposed to the manifest behavior of gender nonconformers as signaling some manner of continuum. I would argue that we are looking not at a continuum of femininity, but rather a continuum of ego integration and psychic structure. So-called nonconforming boys can be just as feminine as GID boys, but the femininity is contained within a more stable psychic structure. The femininity of GID boys is looked upon as extreme because of the affect that surrounds their gender performances—at times nearly hysterical performances that simultaneously mask and unveil chaotic states of regression and psychic pain.

Consider the play behavior of two 4-year-old boys I have seen in consultation within the past year. Both boys were brought for consultation following concern about their manifest gender behavior. Jerry spent much of the hour dressing Barbie and setting up various domestic scenarios, such as cooking breakfast. The domestic scenarios, however, seemed secondary to Barbie’s many costume changes, and her apparent wish for admiration. These costume changes were undertaken with an eye toward detail, and considerable care was exercised to ensure that Barbie looked “just right.” At first, I was not given a role within the play, but Jerry did frequently look toward me, through Barbie, for admiration. Barbie often inquired as to whether I liked what she was wearing, or whether I liked what she had done with her hair. As I indicated my willingness to play as Jerry wished, I was given the role of Barbie’s husband and the domestic scenarios became more central. These prosaic scenarios were played out in a rather inert manner, that struck me as constricted and lacking in the
pleasure of play. My impression that such constriction may have been an artifact of being observed was confirmed by Jerry’s parents and preschool teachers, who indicated that in more familiar contexts, Jerry was often to be found pleasurably absorbed in domestic play.

The second boy, Donald, spent the entire hour enacting a scene with Barbie that centered around being menaced. Barbie was elaborately dressed, then stripped, tied to a tree, and repeatedly threatened with the possibility of violence. At first a male doll approached, struck Barbie and, as she struggled, pushed himself up against her. Further into the play, the same menacing behaviors were enacted by a dog. Chaos followed these threats. Barbie would thrash about, scream, break free, and run to me. I was charged with offering her protection and safety. Eventually, though, she would be wrenched from her safe haven and the drama would be reenacted.

I would suggest that what distinguishes these two play scenarios is not the femininity but the expression of psychic pain. Moreover, what distinguishes these interactions is the nature and quality of the boys’ defenses and object relations. Jerry’s constriction which suggested the pain of shame, contrasts with Donald’s ritualized and nearly hysterical expression of traumatic pain. Donald’s play of menace was rigidly and compulsively repeated. Each repetition resulted in such chaotic escalation that I found it necessary to redirect the play so that Donald would not injure himself. Behavior that is compulsive and rigid is often employed to effect a shutdown of affective life. But Donald’s efforts along these lines failed him as the fear and anxiety overwhelmed his defensive organization, leaving him dependent on adult assistance and care. Jerry cautiously looked toward the adult for assurance, but on the level of self-esteem, not ego integration. The obsessive and narcissistic features that characterized Jerry’s play did not bespeak the sense of urgency and need that characterized Donald’s play. Aside from the variance in Jerry’s gender play, and the narcissistic conflict such variance invokes (Can I have this fantasy? Can I wish as a boy to play as a girl looking toward a boy for admiration? Can I wish to be beautiful?), he did not present any clinical symptoms that called into question his emotional development. Aside from his gender variance, neither his parents or his teachers had other concerns. Likewise, his history was clinically unremarkable. Donald’s early history, on the other hand, and without going into detail, was replete with indications of developmental strain and early trauma, including the loss of his mother and brother, that could account for the disruption in Donald’s psychic growth. In turn, Donald’s daily life, both at home and at school, was beset by disorganization and distress.

The contemplation of psychic growth unfortunately takes us into the realm of health. I say unfortunately, because health has gotten a bad rap in these postmodern times, as well it should. In keeping with postmodern trends in contemporary psychoanalytic thought, mental health is no longer equated with equilibrium and self-possession but rather with some faculty to contain fragmentation. We introduce more and more violent and unresolvable subject matter, making only fragments possible [Flax, 1990]. Health raises the specter of hierarchies, quantities, and virtue. “Health” has too often been bestowed by authorized doctors upon unauthorized patients, and developmental hierarchies that are advanced in the name of health have too often been misused in the name of conformity. The conflation of conformity with health has perhaps been nowhere more evident than in developmental theories of gender.

Pointing toward the conflation of health and conformity has been a central tactic of feminist and queer theorists as they have set about retheorizing gender. Such contemporary reconsiderations have lead to the question, Does gender have a place at all in a postmodern discussion of health? And it is that question that underscores my dilemma in thinking about children who have been identified as suffering from
a gender identity disorder. I find myself thinking, isn’t a gender identity disorder the apotheosis of postmodernism? Do these children pose an irresolvable conflict that destabilizes the binary categories of male and female, and in so doing promotes a crisis of category itself (Garber, 1992)? What could be more postmodern?

We are left to ask, are these children constructed as disordered because we have no other category for them? And further, does such categorization result in additional psychic pain? I think we have to answer, yes and yes. Gender identity disorder is the constructed category within which these boys are placed. I feel all such classificatory practices should be rigorously questioned and challenged for the manner in which they are constructed. I could call a number of aspects of this category into question. I have chosen here to focus on one—throughout this paper I have and will continue to focus on the problem of effeminacy. Boys and men who exhibit cross-gender behaviors are always at odds with the culture, and their oddity is met with contempt and hostility. Such antipathy often takes the form of comparing such boys to girls, as though placing a boy in the category “girl” is an act of devaluing. As Garber (1992) has pointed out, “in expressing condemnation of various types of men, it is always women who are scapegoated” (p. 138). Indeed, within the sissy-boy discourse, femininity becomes a symptom. Friedman (1988) actually employs the diagnostic phrase “femalelike symptoms,” as if to suggest that one could fall ill with the disease of femininity (p. 199). Chassegeut-Smirgel (1976) goes one better with her prognostication that too much access to femininity can lead to “psychic death” for a boy (p. 349). Not only can one fall ill with femininity, but apparently it’s fatal.

The point here is that the diagnosis of gender identity disorder takes place within a contested realm of human experience, namely, femininity. One could, therefore, reasonably ask, can these boys be seen outside of the belief that femininity is intrinsically diseased? The invidious effects of such thinking with regard to the ways in which women and girls have been thought of and treated has by now been well documented by others. Similarly, the effects of what I have referred to as the trauma equation of male homosexuality (male homosexuality = femininity = trauma) (Corbett, 1993a) are increasingly being brought to light through the action of gay liberation politics and the burgeoning field of queer studies. For specific and insightful analyses of these issues relative to boyhood femininity, I direct you to Mass (1990) and Sedgwick (1993). I hope to add my voice to this, as yet, small chorus as I move forward in this paper.

But to stop here, and not tangle with the psychic features of gender and its complex relationship to health and development, would be as problematic as conflating health with conformity. Antidevelopmental discourse too often romanticizes pain, underestimates the profound impact of early parent—child relations, and undervalue the role of ego integration in human development. Confining the debate about boyhood femininity to categories and the social construction of gender misses several features of the genderness of boys diagnosed as gender identity disordered. Most importantly, such a vantage point misses the necessity, melancholy, abjection, and anxiety that surrounds these boys’ gender performances. The affect that surrounds the femininity illustrates how gender is not only a constructed category, but also a psychic performance.

Pain can collect around gender. But how do we speak about that pain, when the gender in question is in and of itself...
contested—when the gender itself is burdened with the pain of shame? How do we speak about pain and gender, when the pain is more acute and distressing than shame—when the pain speaks through symptoms indicative of a breakdown in psychic structure (splitting, dissociations, depersonalization, regression, and omnipotent dependencies)? And how do we speak about pain and gender when, if we have learned anything through the queer reappraisals of the psychoanalytic theory of homosexuality, it is that psychologists have a way of looking at variation and calling it illness. This dilemma, which is so well illustrated by the very notion of a gender identity disorder, points to our need to find a way to approach the interimplication of the psyche, the soma, and the social.

Coates (Coates et al., 1991; Coates, 1992, 1994) has started off down this road, and has gone some distance toward understanding the pain of some feminine boys, who, she suggests, are in pain beyond shame. She has proposed that for GID boys, cross-gendered fantasies and behaviors psychically perform as compromise formations that function to manage separation anxiety and aggression. In so doing, she has provided us with an intricate analysis of how gender can be knit into psychic pain. She also succeeds in drawing our attention to the way in which gender is knit into psychic growth. Gender is theorized as a fundamental organizing phenomenon of early childhood, and Coates presents a composite analysis of the multiple factors that contribute to gender’s development, including biology, cognition, and parental psychodynamics.

But there is an aspect of gender’s development that is conspicuously undertheorized within Coates’ work, namely, the social. In her more recent work, Coates (1994) has endeavored to define gender as “a social-psychological construct that is shaped by societal norms and personal experience” (p. 3). And by drawing on the reappraisals of feminist psychoanalysts, Coates has begun to speak about the injustices that have attended gender definitions. In other words, Coates has begun to incorporate ideas about the social construction of gender into her theorizing about GID. Yet she makes no effort to specifically address boyhood femininity as shaped or constructed by societal norms. She does not adequately consider the fact that effeminacy is a contested realm of human experience. And her failure to directly address the social construction of effeminacy is both clinically and theoretically insufficient.

The clinical insufficiency that issues from not taking up the problem of effeminacy is that it leaves one inadequately prepared to address countertransference, and to recognize if counterresistance or counteranxiety is being repeated in the treatment. For example, there is a nagging technical dilemma that haunts Coates’ therapeutic technique. Although she maintains that “cross-gender behaviors per se are not the focus of treatment,” they nevertheless, “present a number of issues that constitute a complex challenge to the therapist” (Coates, 1994, p. 17). One such challenge is the management of cross-gender behaviors. In general, Coates advocates neither passively accepting nor encouraging such behaviors, while at the same time not suppressing them. It appears that such a stance often results in a kind of ameliorating or modifying substitution for cross-gender behaviors. For example, Coates (1994) suggests to a father that his son may want fancy boy’s clothes instead of a tutu. Several rationales are presented for such management, but these efforts are primarily presented as a means to foster better adaptive skills, and thereby minimize scapegoating at the hands of peers.

Coates’ redirection of cross-gender behavior may in many respects be clinically well reasoned. For instance, I think it is likely that feminine boys who present with a more intact psychic structure and better
ego integration are better able to read social cues, and thereby, at least partially, better able to protect themselves. But failing to ask at what cost such adaptation takes place misses a vital aspect of these boys’ reality, and how that reality may contribute to their experience of psychic pain. Moreover, the ways in which misogyny is knit into these boys’ psychic reality is not adequately entertained. Femininity is consistently greeted with counterresistance and counteranxiety, and the feminine hand is invariably and steadfastly forced toward adaptation.

Coates’ omission of the problem of effeminacy also has the unintended effect of suggesting that all male femininity is symptomatic or pathological. Coates (1992) maintains that she “does not view crossgender fantasies as a problem when they are not relied upon in a compulsive and addictive way” (p. 262). And she has clearly indicated that she does not believe boyhood femininity is pathological (personal communication). Yet, in what is now a rather comprehensive body of work, she has still to present examples of nonproblematic boyhood femininity, either in reference to a child in treatment or in presenting a feminine boy who does not fit the criteria for GID. As a result, we are not given clinical or developmental data about a broad range of feminine boys, and this narrow focus helps sustain the view that all boyhood femininity is pathological. To take Coates to task for not presenting a wider range of feminine boys is to some extent unjust; Coates has not set out to study a wide range of feminine boys. Nonetheless, I feel that theorists who are addressing gender identity disorder have a responsibility to encourage and participate in a discourse that will, hopefully, result in a more complex theory of boyhood femininity.

We need to begin examining boyhood femininity across a spectrum of boyhood health. All manifest feminine behaviors do not flow from the same psychic structure or level of ego integration. All manifest feminine behaviors do not flow from the same latent fantasy. All manifest feminine identifications do not flow from the same internal world. Further, manifest feminine behaviors vary relative to the affect that they express; not all manifest feminine behaviors are an expression of pain. By not examining boyhood femininity across a broader range of mental health, gender is maintained as a system of conformity as opposed to a system of variation. This emphasis on conformity sustains the shaming attribution of a nonconforming, damaged, or abjected gender to those boys who step over the normative line. It is with an eye toward those boys that I now turn.

**Notes on Girlyboys**

**Girlyboys Defined**

1. Feminine identifications for homosexual boys are not so much an expression of a wish to be a girl (although often that is the manifest behavior and, at times, that is the latent wish) but rather an avenue to passive experience and wish fulfillment.\(^4\) Passive longings and feminine identifications reside alongside a masculine identification, often creating what one patient referred to as “mixed gender feelings” during boyhood. For example, a gay male patient stated, “I know that my father wanted me to be a man, and I knew that I was not being a man like him. I was not being a woman, but I was not being a man within his definition of it.” He rather aptly expresses the paradox of the girlyboy’s experience of gender: Gender is not fixed, but mixed. Girlyboys do not feel themselves to be girls, exactly, although they are aware of identifying with their mothers more than do most boys. They
As with all conventional binaries, passivity can exist only in reference to its dialectical opposite, activity. Given the nature of this dialectic, one could reasonably question whether passivity exists at all. However, opposites that are held in a dialectical tension are not negated through such tension. They may contradict one another. They may fold into one another, as passivity may fold into activity, and thereby be transformed. But contradiction and transformation do not neutralize the dialectical poles; rather, they hold them in a qualified tension. So long as one is aware of the manner in which activity and passivity are qualified through this dialectical tension, I believe that passive and active wishes can be identified. Moreover, I maintain that identifying these wishes is both clinically relevant and significant.

I am defining male homosexual passivity as manifested by a variety of wishes and behaviors, ranging from the object relational wish to be cared for by another man to the sexual wish to have one’s erogenous zones touched or filled by another man. For example, passivity can be expressed through the wish to be held by another man. A gay male patient of mine speaks of his pleasure in “sleeping like spoons” cradled in his lover’s arms. He especially enjoys the sense of his lover as being “bigger and stronger, and able to envelope” him. Passive desire is also expressed through the pleasure that gay men experience in anal intercourse. Describing a fantasy of loving merger, a gay male patient stated, “When Alex is in me, it’s like I feel filled up with him. Like his cock reaches all the way through to mine, as though we are one.” Both of these examples serve to illustrate a central feature of passivity—a temporary losing sight of the self through a merging surrender with another.

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have girl friends and enjoy participating in games and pastimes with girls more than do most boys. They do not feel themselves to be boys, exactly, at least as it is defined by their fathers and their male peers. They do not wish to grow up to be women nor to deny their male bodies. Many do, however, experience concern about the adequacy of their male bodies, worrying that perhaps they are too small, too weak, or that some aspect of their bodies is too much like that of a girl. While such concern is often experienced on the level of the body, many of these boys have an inchoate understanding that their identity is a matter of mind. For example, one patient said, “I just couldn’t seem to get my mind to work like other boys, and then get my body to follow.”

Girlyboys Do Not Fight

1. Simon’s family moved in the middle of his sixth grade year. He recalled how his “Junior-high angst” was magnified by both the loss of old friends and the familiarity of his old school. He took note of how the turmoil of the move paralleled a growing sense of turmoil regarding his sexual identity. During the first week at the new school, a classmate invited Simon to hang out after school. They spent a couple of hours in a neighborhood park, sharing a cigarette, and talking. Simon recalled feeling some relief about his capacity to relate to this new boy, in that his prior relations with boys had often been strained. He indicated that he had never felt entirely comfortable in the company of other boys. In retrospect, Simon wondered if he did not find this boy attractive, but indicated that if he did, he “was busy repressing it.” A few days after their afternoon in the park, the seemingly friendly boy attempted to provoke a fight with Simon in front of a group of other boys. Simon recalled feeling very anxious, frightened, and “utterly confused.” He feared that he would begin to cry. As he backed away from the crowd, the inviting-boy taunted Simon, calling him a “pussy.”

2. Arnie recalls that in sixth grade he had his first male teacher. This teacher seemed to take a special interest in Arnie, who, in turn, enjoyed the attention. During a parent conference, the teacher apparently told Arnie’s parents that he felt Arnie needed to develop greater “masculine self-esteem,” and advised them to encourage Arnie to join the school’s wrestling team. Arnie recollected feeling “revealed” and “somehow betrayed” by his teacher, as well as “pushed” by his parents. He reluctantly
joined the team and, to his surprise, found that he could “pass.” But he began to grow increasingly uncomfortable with wrestling, not only due to the pressure of having to sustain a false adaptation to please his parents and teacher, but also because he began to be aware of sexual feelings that were stimulated by the physical contact with other boys. Fearful that he would not be able to “control [his] penis,” he fashioned a hard plastic liner for his jock-support, hoping that the device would suppress his desire. His anxiety did not abate, and so he added another layer of plastic, and took to wearing two pairs of underpants over the device. Arnie eventually left the wrestling team and joined another after-school activity. But he recalled how his teacher “made an example of [him] in front of the whole class” by labeling his withdrawal as a “failure of will.”

3. Pointing out the conflicts that girlyboys have with aggression and rough-and-tumble play is a hallmark of the sissy-boy discourse. In fact, Friedman (1988) seizes on this aspect of girlyboy behavior as the queer common denominator. According to Friedman, the problem with girlyboys is that they do not fight. They do not occupy the privileged masculine domain of battle. They do not sport the vim of victory, or the stamina of defeat. They do not put up their dukes.

Traditionally, we have been told that such fear represents a retreat from oedipal rivalry and competition. Indeed, I believe that girlyboys may face a particular and complex oedipal conflict. However, modern retheorization of homosexuality would suggest possibilities beyond simple oedipal retreat. For example, Isay (1989) has retheorized male homosexual development through his consideration of a homosexual boy’s oedipal desire for his father. And Silverman (1992) has pointed to the various ways in which male homosexual desire may be tethered to a boy’s identification with his mother. Such oedipal configurations may, in part, account for a girlyboy’s conflict with aggression. For example, it seems likely that a girlyboy’s aggressive feelings may conflict with his wishes to be cared for by men.

Friedman (1988) unwittingly reflects this possibility in his description of Sam, whose “first memories were of feeling insecure and vulnerable. He recalled that at age five, he had been envious of girls because they were taken care of by men when they grew up” (p. 28). Instead of taking this opportunity to reflect on Sam’s desire, Friedman contrasts Sam’s vulnerability with his heterosexual twin brother’s security and boyhood rowdiness. Friedman points out that while “unassertive” “mama’s boy”

Sam was “frightened of rough-and-tumble activities,” his twin “never felt unmasculine or feminine,” and “responded to challenge with attack and usually emerged the victor in fights with other boys” (pp. 28-29).

Friedman’s reflections along these lines reveal his belief in the manner in which a boy must gain masculine identity and competency through aggression. Regarding this belief that aggression underlies masculine development, Person (1986) has pointed out that, “The fundamental sexual problem for boys is the struggle to achieve phallic strength and power vis-à-vis other men” (p. 72). Phallic narcissism and activity must be maintained and passivity must be repudiated. In particular, passive desire for another man is to be denied. Elsewhere, I have taken up the limits of such a phallic narcissistic solution to serve as the foundation of masculinity (Corbett, 1993b). Suffice to say that if we accept phallic narcissism (along with the
denial of the contribution of prephallic factors) as the foundation of masculinity, we are left also to accept the sadistic and narcissistic consequences of such masculinity.

4. As is well known, perhaps more in life than in theory, men and boys are often easily provoked into defending the honor of their masculinity via violent means. Yesterday's duels bleed into today's drive-by shootings. Needless to say, the ravages of such sadistic mastery have an ignominious history. But a part of this history that has not been so well documented is the hate and violence employed by men to defend the honor of their masculinity from the perceived threat of homosexuality. One of the reasons this history has gone undocumented is the belief that such hate is constitutive of masculinity. It is one of the ways in which boys will be boys.

An especially insidious example of the way in which this boys-will-be-boys defense is employed to ward off the threat of homosexuality is the way in which girlyboys are encouraged to join the masculine fold, lest they fall victim to masculine protest. Consider this material taken from a case reported by Green (1987). In meeting with a boy's parents following a consultation with their son, Green states:

My position with him tonight in play was that I can understand that not everybody likes to play ball...But at the same time he doesn't have to do girlish things. That's something, doing sissy things, that people make fun of...He is going to be very unhappy doing sissy things. He heard me. He just sat there...He got a little upset and put the doll away. I told him that as he grows up, and if he continues to do sissy things, that he won't have many friends, and people will make fun of him, and he will be very unhappy [p. 274].

Following this consult with Green, the boy participates in a group with other boys. When one of the boys in the group initiates some crossgender play, the boy Green had just seen in consultation says:

He should be spanked. Or at least reminded. He probably wants to be a girl, because he can wear girls' dresses and have long hair. But he shouldn't do this because children will make fun of him. Boys burn up dresses of boys. Boys can go places and have more fun [p. 271].

5. Deep in the Bible Belt, Wally kept a diary. He tells me that it mostly consisted of drawings that evolved from princesses to fashion models to classical Greek sculpture. He kept it hidden under the floorboards of his closet. After his first sexual experience with a boy, and in a state of great shame and anxiety, he burned the diary. He buried the charred object in a nearby field.

**Girlyboys and the Penis**

1. Girlyboys have a penis, want a penis, and often identify with those who do not have a penis. This having, desiring, and lacking contribute to a unique gender experience. One feature of this experience is a particular form of anxiety: girlyboys frequently feel their bodies to be inadequately phallic. Conflict over internal identifications and desires are expressed through the belief that their bodies are lacking in what they feel to be a masculine essentialism. And while this essentialist anxiety can be focused directly on the penis, it is more likely to be expressed with regard to overall body size and strength.

2. Zach tells me a joke with the following punch line: “Santa I want a lot of shit for Christmas—money, a baby, and a penis.” And then Zach exclaims, “What in the world do I want with two things that I already have, and one that I couldn't possibly
When I ask which two does he have, and which one couldn't he have, he impatiently says, “Well, it’s obvious, isn’t it? I’m a man, after all.” Later in the same hour, he associates to his efforts to repress his homosexual desire during adolescence. Typical of adolescent boys, he was anxious about his ability to control his penis. His anxiety took a particular form. He says, “To get an erection in the locker room would be to be seen as a girl.” This seemed a remarkable statement to me, and I said as much. I then reflected on how he might have felt there was no way to be seen as a homosexual boy. Zach then recalls his earlier statement about being an obvious man, and laughs as he says, “It’s hardly been obvious.”

After the session, I found myself wondering, what is it that makes manhood obvious? And while I considered a number of possibilities, I think that Zach was pointing out the privileged display of the heterosexual phallus in contrast to his struggle with his homosexual erection, his homosexual phallus. And I began to think of how the penis is invested with an identity. Some men even name their penises. I considered how it may be easier to name your penis if it behaves as convention dictates. Convention provides a ready-made category, unlike Zach’s category crisis: Does his erection, the sine qua non of maleness, make him a girl?

The manner in which this category crisis takes place on the level of the body is a central conflict of girlyboyhood. A girlyboy is aware of his male body and the masculine gender identity that attends such a surface. However, as he grows more aware of his identifications with women and his desires for men, a conscious conflict ensues: Can he have such wishes and identifications and still have the body of a boy? Do such wishes somehow belie a male body?

3. One aspect of this phallic conflict, I have seen repeatedly in psychotherapy with gay men, is the manner in which girlyboys idealize and envy the conventional heterosexual phallus. Consider the following memory Jack reports in the opening phase of his treatment. At around age 9, he was out riding his bike, and came upon a group of older boys playing baseball. He stopped to watch them, and became transfixed by the first baseman. Jack was especially taken with the older boy’s arms, the way his muscles strained against his t-shirt, and the fact that this boy could drink a beer and play ball at the same time. Jack indicated that as he straddled his bike, he became aware of a wish to see the boy naked, and became aware of his own body as well. In contrast to the older boy, Jack felt “skinny,” with “stick arms,” and a small penis. Jack tagged this memory as his first conscious experience of homosexual desire. And while reflecting on the “maelstrom of feeling” provoked by this incident, he asked, “Did I want to be him, or be with him?” and answered, “I suppose it was both.”

As Jack’s treatment progressed we were able to see the ways in which his mixed wish of being and wanting was often defended against through envy—a kind of penis envy. Other men were consistently depicted as more active and phallic, while Jack forecasted a life of fundamental dissatisfaction following on his painful feelings of deficiency and lack. Jack’s conflict was manifested in a variety of ways, most notably through his “slavish” attachments to men, whom he enviously admired as more potent, and as having “natural” access to a world outside his reach. Jack also set about fashioning himself into the kind of man he desired. Through a strenuous program of
working out, he produced an idealized phallic surface. The surface got results, in the form of a lot of attention from other men. But Jack was perplexed by his lack of satisfaction. With time we were able to understand that while Jack had taken on a phallic surface, he did not necessarily desire to be phallic. Instead, he wanted to find a phallic other.

Principle to our analysis of Jack’s wish for a phallic other was understanding how Jack’s envy was a defensive move against possessing his own desire and his own body. As Torok (1985) has suggested in reference to penis envy, “The problem of analysis is precisely to bring back into the open the authentic but repressed desire which, disguised as envy, has remained hidden” (p. 136). Slowly, we were able to see that the inhibitions and envious conflicts that repeatedly interrupted Jack’s life served to repress (principally passive) desires that he found “shameful, unmanly, and unacceptable.” We were able to trace one root of this repression to his childhood belief that his desires were flawed, and to further trace how this belief of deficiency was experienced on the level of his body.

In addition, we were also able to see the ways in which the cultural prohibition against the homosexual phallus contributes to such feelings of deficiency and envy. Following a weekend spent with his oftentimes younger brother, Jack complained about his feelings of inhibition in expressing his desire. It’s like he had access to a font of sexuality that was off-limits to me.” At another point, he reflected on how as adolescents, he saw his brother as being able to “project sexuality and potency” in a way that once again was not within his reach. Continuing, Jack said, “It’s like he could advertise it, put it out there, but I couldn’t wish to get it, couldn’t even become aware of wanting it.”

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1. Peter says, “I was always in the kitchen with the women,” and I think of Prior in *Angels in America* ([Kushner, 1992]). When asked, “Would you say that you are a typical homosexual?” Prior replies, “Me, oh I’m *stereotypical*” (p. 99).

   Peter’s in-the-kitchen-with-the-women sentiment embodies a stereotype of protogay boys. The kitchen is a girlyboy domain, a stereotypical domain, a stereo domain—that is through two channels—for Peter intended to impart the manner in which he finds and refinds his mother in the kitchen and in himself. Mothers have a way of recurring, and one repeatedly finds them either in the self or in the other. Analysts would have us believe that girlyboys find too much mother in themselves, and not enough in others.

   Peter’s mother was everywhere. She was at the center of his childhood memories. She was the shy, loving mother with whom he shared a blissful childhood. She was the creative mother he found and refound in his work as an artist. She was the Christian mother he found and refound in his efforts to establish a center for the homeless with AIDS. She was the rural mother of nature, the mother of the woods he found and refound in his garden. Like the woods, her maternal body emerged, within Peter’s dreams, as protective, yet wild and filled with undergrowth. She was both the phallic and containing mother. She was earnest and empathic. She was aggressive and threatening. She was the overprotective mother, who seemed out of touch with her child’s growth. She was the mother who repeatedly emerged as repressive and censorious. She was the mother he feared he damaged through his own separation and sexual development. She was the mother from whom he hid his phallic strivings. She was the mother who baked a cake on the occasion of his fifth anniversary with his lover. Such contradictory themes are to be found in every intensive psychotherapy. Such contradictory themes abound around those to whom one is
deeply attached.

Peter struggled to sustain his deep attachment to and identification with his mother, while also attempting to move ahead to new attachments and an expanded sense of identity. It was a difficult struggle. But, importantly, a struggle within the neurotic spectrum of distress, not a struggle that revealed a fragmented self and distortions in mental functioning—the kind of distress analysts have so often prognosticated for boys who identify with their mothers.

2. Analysts have repeatedly posited a developmental course for boys who identify with their mothers that assumes early trauma, and forecasts poor ego development and maturational difficulties. In fact, the idea of development is incongruous within this model of arrest. Current psychoanalytic developmental theory does not afford the possibility that a feminine boy could have his own feminine identity. Rather he is seen as subsumed within his mother’s identity. There has been no effort to entertain the ways in which a boy may identify with his mother as distinct from a regressive lack of separation.

This gap in our theorizing reveals at least two pernicious and dogged features of psychoanalytic theory:

i. Mothers and women are consistently constructed as archaic and regressive. The mothers of girlyboys are viewed as especially dangerous. In fact, Green (1987) advises, “You’ve got to get these mothers out of the way. Feminine kids don’t need their mothers around” (p. 275).

ii. Ego integration and character development are tethered to sexlinked parent-child identifications. According to psychoanalytic theory, one develops an integrated ego and a stable character through identification with one’s parents. This identificatory process has consistently been theorized as sex-linked; boys are supposed to identify with their fathers, and girls are supposed to identify with their mothers. Through this so-called logic, ego development, character development, and gender development commingle. As I have argued elsewhere (Corbett, 1993a), through this commingling of ego, character, and gender, analysts perpetuate the belief that masculine health is signaled by the reproduction of fathering. A healthy boy wishes to be a father. Those boys who wish to be a mother are seen not only as having stepped off their proper developmental ladder, but also as traumatically falling into the arms of an archaic mother. Mothers continue to be marginalized, or pathologized as overprotective, indulgent, seductive, overanxious, or unhappily married. There is no consideration of the possibility that a mother’s and son’s subjectivities may afford greater closeness and empathy.

3. Girlyboys face a special crisis in separating from their mothers. They do not wish to disidentify with their mothers. Rather, they strive

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to retain feminine identifications. Their wishes are greeted with denial as they attempt to move forward. There is no cultural support, no place of cultural malleability, for such a developmental wish. By not moving toward an identification with their father—the move that is expected and encouraged—girlyboys face a crisis of shame and narcissistic injury that can lead
to boyhood depression. However, the vestiges of this early crisis may not be solely traumatic. It appears that, at least for some girlyboys, the long struggle to overcome shame and depression (the long struggle to come out) may foster greater character flexibility and empathy.

**Girlyboys Adorn**

1. A mother of a boy in Green's (1987) group of girlyboys says of her son, “He loved beautiful things. There was just so much he could do with girls' hair and a girl's dress and her body. He just liked pretty things” (p. 122). A patient described how he had a knack for dressing Barbie and doing her hair. He was not as interested in the play that would ensue as he was in the act of dressing. He enjoyed creating Barbie as an aesthetic object to be admired and desired. Another patient described how as a child he enjoyed having “mock weddings and mock children.” He claimed that his interest in playing at marriage was not fostered by wishes to enact the role of groom, but rather, he said, “The impetus for all of that was to get dressed up and have a wedding. We borrowed all my aunt's prom dresses—that was undoubtedly the reason for it. So I could do the flowers and the hair!”

2. Girlyboys have a feeling for artifice, beauty, and style. The body often becomes the avenue for this mode of aestheticism. Girlyboys dress. They dress up. They accessorize. They delight in gender's masquerade. They do not simply throw clothes on; they put clothes together in an act of presentation. They love themselves as beautiful. They want others to love them as beautiful as well. But such narcissistic delight is policed as feminine. Girlyboys begin to equate such narcissistic delight with the shame of losing hold over their proper gender. In turn, they learn to defend against such narcissistic yearning through envy and repression.

3. Throughout the beginning of an hour, Paul repeatedly indicates that he is unhappy with a new shirt he is wearing. I find myself somewhat perplexed in that the shirt is in my eyes rather nondescript. But when I ask him to what is he referring, he replies, “You know.” When I indicate that in fact I am not sure that I do know, he becomes rather exasperated and maintains, “Yes, you do.” Further into the hour, Paul recalls an incident from his childhood, a struggle with his mother over who would choose his school clothes. Apparently she had chosen some items, including a pair of blue shoes, that he did not like, which led him to tell her they were ugly and he would not wear them. They left the store angry and empty-handed. When I inquire as to why his thoughts may have returned to this childhood scene, Paul cuts me short, saying, “I wanted the black shoes—Beatle boots, really.” To which I reply, “I see,” for in fact in a certain way I did. It is then that I realize the shirt is black.

He explains that later that evening he is to meet a date for dinner, and that is why he is wearing the new shirt. But now he fears the shirt is “too much.” I question, is the shirt too much, or something else, perhaps his wish to be admired and desired? He wearily entertains this inquiry, but indicates that he does not trust my analysis. “After all,” he says, “look at how you dress.” I have the urge to check to see if I am wearing Beatle boots. Instead I ask what it is about the way I dress. With much reluctance, he accuses me of dressing to attract the attention of men. I point out both his reluctance and accusatory tone—as though I should be ashamed of such a wish. He once again wearily entertains my interpretation, but we are to return to such material many times within this young man's treatment.
Girlyboys Flame

1. Stoller (1968) maintains that girlyboys show “precocious ability with paints and other coloring materials, not only in the flamboyant use of colors but also in imaginative, well-formed objects expansively placed on paper and telling an understandable story” (p. 127). Then, without adequate explanation, he denounces such creativity and flamboyance as a “lovely sign of nonetheless psychopathology,” which he believes either time or treatment will remove (p. 128).

2. Bobby, who works as a designer, tells me, “I come to the world through my eyes. Mine is a totally visual world. I can look at a room, have a vision, and make it happen, and (he adds with a laugh) I can look at a room and know it’s not happening.” He goes ahead to detail how he works to suppress what he sees, lest he should be taken for an “effete snob.” In the next hour, he comes back to his effort to hide what he sees, and blurts out that for two years he has held back on telling me that the carpeting in my office is “just dreadful.” I comment that it seems he has been quite concerned about how I would react to what he sees. He replies, “You know, it’s just all that sissy shit. Boys are not supposed to notice carpeting—they just track mud on it.” He paused, and then returned to a memory that had come up several times in the course of his treatment. When he was a young boy there was a playhouse on his family’s property. The house had been used for many years by his older brothers as a neighborhood clubhouse. When his brothers moved on to other interests, the house fell into his hands. Laying claim to the house, Bobby set about redecorating, as he described it, “à la ‘Bewitched,’ an homage to Samantha, very 60s housewife.” He made curtains, he painted, he applied applique daisies to the walls, and his crowning achievement was wall-to-wall shag carpeting made from remnants he procured from the trash. He undertook this project in secret, wishing to unveil it to his family upon completion. Unveil it he did, and Bobby laughs as he says, “Can you imagine? They were horrified—amused, but horrified.”

In the course of Bobby’s treatment, he would frequently circle back to his efforts to hide his domestic visions, even as he built a successful career around creating such visions for others. This act of hiding, this wishing not to see, served as a gateway to his conflict with feminine identifications. Boys were not supposed to see the realm of the domestic, much less wish to be creative within that realm. He frequently insinuated that domestic creations were evidence of a faulty boy, who was weak and mediocre. But as Bobby described some of his childhood projects, such as the clubhouse, they hardly struck me as mediocre or weak. As I pointed out, such projects, and the manner in which he conveyed them, seemed to be fueled by complete seriousness and passion. One does not stitch wall-to-wall carpeting without drive. Eventually we began to see Bobby's wish to look away from his visions as a defense against his love of extravagance and flamboyance. As Bobby put it, “You notice, I wasn’t interested in June Cleaver, it was Samantha who did it for me.”

It became important to understand that Bobby’s visions were not solely domestic. In fact, he often set out to undomesticate the domestic. Along these lines, Bobby took on the job of creating the set for a charity drag ball. He brought in pictures to show me what he had created. He had never done this before, and I was mindful of the unveiling of the clubhouse. As I looked at the photos, I laughed over their outlandish aspect and the zany enthusiasm they seemed to
convey. I noticed, though, that Bobby seemed eager for me to hand the photos back, as though we should not linger over the images. I brought this to his attention, and with some reflection he thought that was correct. As we worked to understand his response, he revealed that he was concerned that I was too permissive. But in addition, he feared that my permissiveness would implode and I would pull away from my enjoyment of his creations. It was in this way that we began to understand an important family dynamic. It seems that his parents and his brothers—his father in particular—often appeared to take great pleasure in Bobby's capacity to create larger-than-life spectacles. But after a while, Bobby felt them to grow self-conscious over such enjoyment, and pull away. In fact, I realized that what I was enjoying was the way in which the photographed images were extreme and irresponsible in their fantasy, and thereby more enjoyable than everyday fantasies. As Sontag (1964) has suggested, such visions are liberated from moral relevance, duty, and seriousness. Such pleasure calls forth policing, guilt, and shame.

**Reclaiming the Girl in Girlyboy**

1. Peter says, “The older you get, the more you understand what’s going on. And the more you realize you shouldn’t be...or that you should be opening up and you are just sort of shutting down.”

2. Femininity in a person with a penis is a transgression. Denial of femininity in a person with a penis is conformity. Girlyboys develop through a dialectic of transgression and conformity. A crucial step in the treatment of any former girlyboy is the recognition of this dialectic and how his early experience is knit into the fabric of his subjectivity.

3. Holly Hughes, in *Clit Notes* (1996) reflects on being called “shameless” by a stranger, after he observed her kissing her girl friend. She says, “I wish what he said were true. I wish I had no shame. Maybe there are shameless queers. But I know that I’m not one of them, and neither is my girl friend. I know that buried deep in our bodies is the shrapnel of memory dripping a poison called shame” (p. 205).

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4. Hughes (1996) continues, “But we’re the lucky ones. There’s not enough shame in us to kill us. Just enough to feel when it rains” (p. 205). My work as a psychologist has taught me many things. One is, that there is indeed luck in survival. Another is, there is growth toward survival. Psychic growth is a proto-gay child’s way out. And for those who have been wounded by the shrapnel of shame, who have felt the shame of being hated, or have suffered the deeper wounds of trauma, understanding psychic pain may provide a way out. It is, therefore, crucial to develop a theoretical apparatus that will account for queer psychic growth and pain.

As I have endeavored to posit within this paper, I believe such a developmental theory can be constructed by retaining the concepts of psychic structure and ego integration, and by moving them forward into revitalized conceptions of identification and relationality. I do not speak of the need for integration, internalization, and identification in human life naive to the postmodern deconstruction of the unity and stability of human subjectivity. Nor do I undertake such a course in opposition to postmodern theories. Rather I contend that a complex appreciation of human subjectivity rests not only on the reversing force of deconstruction (and the widened scope of reality such postmodern techniques achieve), but also on an equal and opposite forwarding force of construction. I believe a concept such as psychic structure can properly denote this multilinearity of psychological process. For example, following on Loewald (1980), I would suggest that early identifications (the linchpin of psychoanalytic developmental theory) through the process of internalization build structure and foster ego integration. These
early levels of psychic development are not simply out grown and left behind, but continue to be active in our patients lives, and come alive through the replenishing regression of an analysis through transference. A central feature of any analysis is the necessity of examining the ways in which early identifications are paradoxically stable and shifting, persistent and dynamic. It may be helpful here to imagine identification as functioning both as the boat and the anchor. Identifications go forward, shifting with the current and/or the cargo, while at the same time they hold fast, they stabilize, and thereby, provide security—but also restrict mobility and transformation.

5. To know someone's gender identity is to know very little. You know one way in which they categorize themselves. You may know something about the identifications and disidentifications this identity is built on. You may know something about how they measure themselves against prevailing cultural norms, and how motivated they may be to adhere to such norms (Person, 1995). You may know something about the ways in which identifications paradoxically construct and deconstruct identities at the same time. And for an analyst these are important things to know.

But not as important as knowing about a patient’s experience of gender and their gender fantasies—as opposed to their gender identities. Analytic inquiry into gender experience and fantasy provides a very valuable way to understand what are generally persistent and organizing fantasies and experiences. As Ethel Person (1995) argues, such fantasies persist in the ways in which they do because they “condense and incorporate in their scripts our early identifications, childhood sexual theories and fantasies, experiences, and solutions to important childhood conflicts” (p. 75). In having the opportunity, as analysts, to examine such early fantasies and experiences, we have the opportunity to learn about our patients' psychic structures; we have the opportunity to understand the ways in which early identifications through internalization build structure and foster ego integration.

6. I like to believe that psychic development is not simply a slow march toward reality. While it is the case that greater ego integration, including the capacity to better adapt to reality, is a feature of development, another feature of development is the capacity to resist reality’s adaptive pull. As Bollas (1992) has argued, “As we grow we become more complex, more mysterious to our self, and less adapted to reality” (p. 50). Drawing on such complexity can allow for the resurfacing of gender’s mystery and complexity within a psychotherapy. Helping queer people in the recovery of their distinct gender mystery provides them with access to a new vantage point from which they can reassess and revalue their development. Similarly, such a vantage point may allow queer people to reassess and revalue cultural ideals with regard to gender and sexuality, and thereby begin to resist the real effects of homophobia and discrimination on queer development.

7. Jack reports being upset with his boyfriend. He tells me he was so upset he thought he was going to cry. He hastens to add, however, that he did not cry, because that would have been “too dramatic.” When I ask, “Who cries dramatically?” Jack replies, “Girls.” I add, “And the
“girl in you?” There is a period of silence. Then, bemused, Jack indicates that he is thinking about a red and yellow dress. Simultaneously we say, “Bright,” referring to a former association. We laugh. Then Jack says, “You know, the more I stop trying not to be a girl, the easier it is for me to be a boy. Whatever in the hell that is.”

References


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