

THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY
SCHREYER HONORS COLLEGE

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

LET'S (NOT) TALK ABOUT SEX, BABY: AN ANALYSIS OF QUEER TOPICS
AND CONTESTATIONS IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

MAEVE KLUTCH
SPRING 2013

A thesis
submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements
for a baccalaureate degree
in English
with honors in English

Reviewed and approved* by the following:

Christopher Castiglia
Liberal Arts Research Professor of English
Thesis Supervisor

Lisa Sternlieb
Associate Professor of English
Honors Adviser

* Signatures are on file in the Schreyer Honors College.

ABSTRACT

Arguably one of the queerest genres of literature today, children's literature (both of the modern and traditional variety) explores many themes that are often deemed inappropriate for children by heteronormative standards: sex, sexuality, and gender bending. This paper will examine the specific genre of queer children's literature and its dualistic reception in American society today. Highlighting three influential and controversial queer children's texts— *My Princess Boy* by Cheryl Kilodavis, *And Tango Makes Three* by Peter Parnell and Justin Richardson, and *King & King* by Linda de Haan and Stern Nijland— this paper will compare and contrast traditional notions of childhood and modern cultural practices. Through the examination of queer children's texts and adult reactions to children's narratives that go outside of normative social values, this paper will investigate the contradictions between queer children's literature and the heteronormative theme of “protecting the children” and “protecting the family” from queer culture.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Figures	iii
Acknowledgements	iv
Chapter 1 Introduction	1
Chapter 2 Saying No to Satan and the Advent of Children’s Literature in America	3
Chapter 3 Performative Play: Childhood Social Agency and Gender Decisions	11
Chapter 4 Are You My Mother?: Questioning the Traditional Family Unit.....	15
Chapter 5 Fairytale Love Stories: Normalizing the Queer	19
Chapter 6 Conclusions	24
BIBLIOGRAPHY	29

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Rumpelstiltskin and his wooden spoon in Grimm, Brothers and Paul O. Zelinsky. <i>Rumpelstiltskin</i> . Puffin, 1996. 37.....	6
Figure 2. Princess Boy playing with his brother in Kilodavis, Cheryl, and Suzanne DeSimone. <i>My Princess Boy</i> . New York: Simon & Schuster Children's, 2010. 7.	12
Figure 3. Tango the penguin and his dads in Richardson, Justin, Peter Parnell, and Henry Cole. <i>And Tango Makes Three</i> . New York: Simon & Schuster for Young Readers, 2005. Cover.....	16
Figure 4. Two kings shared a hidden kiss in Haan, Linda de, and Stern Nijland. <i>King & King</i> . Berkeley: Tricycle Press, 2002. 32.....	21

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to give many thanks to my thesis advisor Chris Castiglia for his patience and enthusiasm. Separated by many miles, Chris was very willing and eager to help me hone my thesis even though he was on sabbatical most of the time. His honors seminar about queer theory inspired me to write this thesis in the first place. I always knew that I wanted to write about children's literature, but Chris' seminar opened my eyes to the vast amount of queerness in our society today that was explained away by heteronormative hegemony. After I started critiquing children's literature as a genre, I found that the genre coincided with the beliefs of even the most radical queer theorists that I studied in Chris' class. Chris encouraged me to see a new sphere in a world that I thought I already knew. I thank Chris for challenging me to critique my own assumptions and beliefs.

I would also like to extend my thanks to my honors adviser Lisa Sternlieb. Answering my frequent questions and concerns about writing a thesis without my thesis adviser close by, Lisa always put in an extra effort to do whatever she could to help make my thesis happen. Despite her many other honors students, Lisa always took care of the behind-the-scenes business and made sure my needs were met and stress reduced.

Finally, I would like to thank Alex Koller, Erin Donlon, and Polly Werner for letting me turn our living room into a library filled with children's literature. I know the endless story time circles got old, but they never once showed any irritation about my reading aloud or late night writing sessions. This is especially generous in our child-sized apartment.

Chapter 1

Introduction

Protected by heteronormative culture where heterosexuality is law, children's literature has been guarded by parents, educators, and lawmakers as an American safe-zone for children to learn and to imagine. Children's literature sets out to teach social norms to children, make learning entertaining, and encourage children to explore their environments, all the while demonstrating that queerness—behaviors, beliefs, or lifestyles that lie outside the markings of heteronormativity—is not something that is wholly accepted or endorsed. While classic pieces of children's literature like *Rumpelstiltskin* by the Grimm Brothers and *Peter Pan* by J.M. Barrie elicit few complaints from parents, queer topics in modern children's literature produce markedly adverse reactions.

Topics in literature (and life) like sexuality, homosexuality, and gender-bending are relegated to the sphere of adulthood; many parents assert that children must avoid topics relating to sexuality and non-normative gender performance because such topics are inappropriate for children of younger age groups, that children are simply incapable of understanding these topics and discussing said topics will only rob them of innocence. However, many topics in children's literature are not as heteronormatively wholesome as most parents assume them to be. By reducing the visibility of queer aspects in traditional and heteronormatively sanctioned texts, references to sex and gender that would typically be deemed inappropriate are cast to the realm of mere child's play or fantasy, effectively

eliminating the need to discuss queer topics with children or give value to queer topics at all. Modern children's books that exist within the category of queer children's literature—like *My Princess Boy* by Cheryl Kilodavis, *And Tango Makes Three* by Justin Richardson and Peter Parnell, and *King & King* by Linda de Haan and Stern Nijland—continue the same queer themes that can be seen in traditional children's literature, but do so with an openness that troubles the heteronormative status quo. Queer children's literature also notably brings to light the contradictions related to the prevalent heteronormative themes of “protecting the children” and “protecting the family” from queer culture. This paper will examine the contradictions, nuances, and intertextuality of traditional and modern queer children's literature, while also investigating the subtle shift that has developed in the last few decades of the readership of queer children's literature.

Chapter 2

Saying No to Satan and the Advent of Children's Literature in America

The role of children's literature has changed over the span of American history, ebbing and flowing from a didactic tool to a social barometer. In the time before the founding of the United States of America, reading was a purely moral skill for children to learn. Initiated by the Old Deluder Satan Act of 1647, literacy was forced upon children by an anxious Puritan Massachusetts government; worried about the eternal safety of the souls of their children, Massachusetts leaders passed a compulsory education law requiring children to be taught how to read the Bible to thwart "the Devil's efforts 'to keep men from the knowledge of the Scriptures'" (Altenbaugh 225). Reading was a way to prevent impressionable children from falling out of God's favor. By reading and analyzing Scripture, children knew when and where to anticipate the Devil and how to avoid his seduction. In the same vein, Enlightenment-era philosophers John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau argued that children are the picture of impressionable innocence and need to be instructed—as they well were with compulsory literacy in the Massachusetts Bay Colony— who and what to follow and value. Indeed, the consensus from these enlightened men was that "the young needed to be sheltered from disorder and bad people in order to learn how to function effectively in the adult world" (Cross 22). Although this thought process is quite an improvement from breaking-in children to sidestep their original sin, the insistence on protecting children from "disorder and bad people" leaves much room for social hegemony and intolerance by the ruling classes.

As the home becomes the private sphere after the American Revolution, the public and especially the “other,” are rejected from the domain of childrearing. Gary Cross, a historian of children and childhood, argues that “middle-class adults have endeavored to shelter their children from working-class and minority culture, presuming that it is unrefined, often violent, and dangerously sensual and that it encourages immediate gratification” (165). This concept has trickled down through childrearing practices, from the days of compulsory bible reading to today’s web-centric lifestyle: parents want their children to be safe and sheltered, yet aware of the people and circumstances that could prevent their children from living up to social and moral standards. Adjusting children to heteronormative social standards has long been the parental prerogative.

Later in the 18th century, children were catered to for the first time by publishing houses as a profitable demographic; much money is to be made by instructing children the rights and wrongs of social socio-sexual behaviors. *A Little Pretty Pocket Book* by John Newbery was one of the first pieces of literature belonging exclusively to children. The book came with gender specific toys (a pin cushion for the female domestic-to-be and a ball for rowdy boys) and taught the proper ways to behave in society while entertaining its young audience. By the 19th century pleasure was fully incorporated into children’s literature. The publishing of Grimm’s fairy tales in 1812 entertained and thrilled children with dramatic action. In more modern times, children’s literature often fuses social lessons with entertainment. In an interesting change of pace, children’s literature is now frequently used as a didactic tool for parents to explain uncomfortable topics that do not easily fit in the “child’s sphere” (ie. books about sex, the body,

homosexuality, etc.). Although this didactic niche has steeply grown in popularity since the 1989 publishing of *Heather Has Two Mommies* by Lesléa Newman, the niche has also been very emotionally contested by conservative parents and children's groups who fear that teaching children about these topics will corrupt their innocence instead of informing them about the changing world around them. In a country based on Puritan ideals and morality, it is not surprising that American children, the embodiment of innocence, and their spheres are protected by a phalanx of parents armed with fierce social norms. What is surprising, however, is the pervasive amount of queerness in children's literature that parents seem to overlook for the sake of tradition.

Rumpelstiltskin, a German folk tale passed down orally for centuries, exhibited queer themes before a queer identity was even wholly conceptualized. Collected and written for the 1812 book *Children's and Household Tales* by the Grimm Brothers, *Rumpelstiltskin* explores the queer actions of adults in relationship to children. The fairy tale tells the story of a miller's daughter who is given to a rich king to spin gold from straw so her father may gain the king's favor. Crying in her cell, the miller's daughter is visited by a small, goblin like character called Rumpelstiltskin who eventually requests the miller's daughter's first-born child for his gold-spinning services. She agrees, marries the king, and forgets all about Rumpelstiltskin—until he returns to reap his reward of her first son. After a series of guessing games around Rumpelstiltskin's name, the now Queen is able to keep her first-born. Seemingly, all's well that ends well.

An example of heteronormative fear can be seen in the tale of *Rumpelstiltskin*: the fear of men as predators to young children. Frequently this fear is associated with homosexual men. It is no coincidence then that Rumpelstiltskin's name, literally

translated as “rattle stilt” or “rattle pole,” is a representation of a phallic object. Rumpelstiltskin is further characterized as a queered, sexualized character since he is frequently pictured riding a long, broad wooden kitchen spoon—yet another phallic



Fig. 1. Rumpelstiltskin riding his spoon

symbol (see fig. 1). This emphasis on sexualized objects is supposed to teach children to feel uncomfortable or ill at ease about sexual situations, to make children be wary of those who do not follow socio-sexual norms. By making children feel uncomfortable about Rumpelstiltskin, the Grimm brothers prevent Rumpelstiltskin from being a sympathetic character who is simply owed what he is promised. Putting Rumpelstiltskin anywhere near a child, then, must be dangerous since he is so closely associated with the phallus. However, the first relationship we see between child and adult, the one between the miller and his daughter, is an extremely unsettling one. The miller essentially barter his own child for personal wealth and prestige, a horrible deed that his daughter also performs. Essentially the most heteronormative relationship in the tale, the connection between the miller and his daughter is overlooked as the most abusive adult-child relationship. Yet these characters are supposed to be protagonists. Is Rumpelstiltskin really the villain? What do the heteronormative ideals of child-adult relationships teach children in this story?

Exploring the theme of gender roles, J.M. Barrie’s 1911 children’s novel *Peter Pan* (initially published as *Peter and Wendy*) queers traditional literature’s concept of

fantasy. The famous tale revolves around a young boy named Peter who has removed himself from real-world London and lives in Neverland—a land of fantasy and freedom. Peter claims that he does not want to grow up and wants to be a boy forever. He forms a friendship with three children from London—Wendy, John, and Michael—whom he takes to Neverland with him. Peter has a crew of friends called the “Lost Boys” that he lives with. The major conflicts in the tale surround fighting the evil Captain Hook and returning Wendy and her brothers to reality. Peter is sad to leave Wendy, but refuses to let anyone “catch me and make me a man” (Barrie 144).

Peter Pan troubles gender roles through fantasy play. Peter world-builds and creates a space where he can live freely without growing up. His refusal to be “ma[d]e a man” signifies a kind of deviance in Peter that has traditionally been applied as an explanation of homosexuality. Homosexuality has been explained away and characterized as a type of juvenile resistance to taking on the proper gender role of heterosexual men. With this logic, Peter does not want to be a man; therefore, he must not want to inherit manly, gender-stereotyped roles. Peter’s gender is also bent as he associates himself with a group known as “The Lost Boys.” The name “Lost Boys” signifies that something is inherently troubled about their identity as well. The loss present in the boys’ title seems to signify a missing piece of sexual self-understanding. By naming themselves as “lost,” the boys admit to being off course from traditional manhood duties. This being said, their title also seems to harken to a notion of gender trouble where physical sex organs and socially derived identity do not strictly categorize one’s gender associated behaviors.

Peter Pan’s trouble with living up to his prescribed male gender is an example of queerness and gender trouble that is a product of social hegemony. As Judith Butler

argues in “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” Peter’s trouble with manhood is due to socially imposed expectations for a part of the human experience—gender— that is extremely arbitrary: “identity categories tend to be instruments of regulatory regimes, whether as the normalizing categories of oppressive structures or as the rallying points for a liberatory contestation of that very oppression” (308). Peter’s refusal to accept the expected roles of his gender, in Butler’s words “the instruments of regulatory regimes,” forces him to take part in a fantasy that excludes him from the heteronormative demands of his gender. Although Peter does perform the gender role of a boy with his creation of the “Lost Boys” group and his chivalrous treatment of Wendy, his desire for a world with an absence of the responsibility and sexuality of manhood leads to a fantasy of a sexless world. Reinforcing Butler’s argument of gender and gender roles acting as “instruments of regulatory regimes,” this fantasy world is fueled and sustained by what is lacking in “traditional” society: flexibility. Like Michael Bronski argues in “A Dream is a Wish Your Heart Makes,” we cannot always control what we need to fulfill ourselves and our sexual identities: “At any given moment our fantasy image might change depending on what we need” (57). Although Bronski is speaking specifically about sexually fantasy, Peter’s fantasy of sexual absence also fits within the same argument: what we need as humans is directly related to what we do not have. And what we have is not always what we need. Therefore our fantasies are also controlled by what we do not have. If he grows up, Peter has the obligation to be a man and all that being a man entails. Being a man is not what he wants or needs so he creates the fantasy of unlimited boyhood that is absent of sex and male stereotypes. The stable utopia created by Peter’s wish for an end of

sexual obligation fulfills fantasies of boyhood independence that are all too often squashed by identifying as male in adulthood.

Although, upon closer examination, *Rumpelstiltskin* and *Peter Pan* demonstrate somewhat unsettling reactions to queerness, they are still noteworthy examples of why American parents put such an emphasis on children's literature in the first place: children's books are scripts for children to understand where they fit in in the world. The majority of these scripts in both texts are highly heteronormative and encourage children to reject the dangerously queer and accept the more normatively queer scripts (as counter-intuitive as that category sounds) in their future lives. That is to say that accepting a majority of normative tenants makes queerness an admirable quirk rather than an unacceptable danger. *Rumpelstiltskin*'s plot puts such an emphasis on the feeling of discomfort related to the character of Rumpelstiltskin that the text preaches for children to avoid sexualized men; however, most of the script does not focus on the dangers of abusive child-parent relationships or dishonest marital relationships. In accordance with Michael Warner's argument about the politics of sexual shame, the sexual stigmas that Rumpelstiltskin embodies are more socially inappropriate and shaming than the errors of the heteronormative characters. For example, the fact that Rumpelstiltskin is an "unmarried" figure, a "nonprocreative" character that must take children, and a character that contributes to improper "cross-generational" dealings with the miller's daughter illustrates the main concerns of heteronormative culture (Warner 26-27). The main fear of heteronormative scripts, then, is protecting traditional family life—not necessarily children—from ruin. Even though the miller would be considered a terrible parent in any

family, his storyline is of no real concern in the script of world-navigating for children because he upholds the heteronormative ideal of family-building fueled by procreation.

Chapter 3

Performative Play: Childhood Social Agency and Gender Decisions

Just as marriage and procreation are displayed to children as a normative requirement, gender and adulthood are displayed in most child-directed texts as static conventions. Every child knows who (more significantly what gender) a mom or a dad is, who a grandma or grandpa, brother or sister should be. Children are instilled with the concepts of categorization and comparison; consequentially, children are taught to place themselves in the correct social category in which they are told to belong. Although this category may change as children grow and develop as members of predominantly heteronormative societies (perhaps from tomboy to girly-girl), children are taught to use gender as a way to investigate where they should fit in a heteronormative social order. Kerry Mallan, author of *Gender Dilemmas in Children's Fiction*, argues that children's literature teaches children how to grow up to be well-rounded adults, but spends most of its efforts emphasizing the well-roundedness through gender roles:

In children's literature [finding an identity] often involves the torturous journey of *becoming*—becoming more mature, more sensitive, more empathetic, more other-regarding, more 'grown-up'. For boys and girls (both fictional and real), gender serves as the organising pedagogical tool for their *becoming* [emphasis in original text] women and men. (8)

Mallan's observation that gender is the unifying standard for encouraging a child to become who he or she is supposed to be—a socially adjusted man or woman—demonstrates a heteronormative policing of gender as a means of measuring social appropriateness. Children and adults who deviate outside the lines of traditional gender

roles would then create an uncomfortable line of gray for children. This begs the question: how do we teach children to be “more empathetic, more other-regarding” while still giving primacy to texts that lead children to believe that they *will* grow up to be the heteronormative men and women?

My Princess Boy by Cheryl

Kilodavis articulates a modern stance relating to Peter Pan’s resistance to be “ma[d]e a man.” The children’s book is written about Kilodavis’ 4 year-old son who adopts traditionally feminine external attributes, including wearing pink, dressing up in princess outfits, and dancing around with his friends and family (see fig. 2). In an attempt to



Fig. 2. Princess Boy playing with his brother

augment the acceptance of children with gender-bending preference, Kilodavis asserts that she wrote the book to “create a space in this world where children who are different, feel different or express themselves differently can be accepted for who they are – period” (“Homepage” n. pag.).

As more of a didactic tool for parents to teach children about gender preference, *My Princess Boy* attempts to garner the same feelings of respect and acceptance that other children’s literature “help” books do. The book shows the Princess Boy being respected and cherished by his family and his peers even though he is not fulfilling heteronormative gender roles. Although the book gives a supportive message about children with any

gender preferences (unlike *Peter Pan*'s more bitter tone toward gender roles), Kilodavis limits her call of acceptance to children only, saying she wants to “support children for who they are and how they wish to look” (“Homepage” n. pag.). Although she is trying to make children more comfortable in their own skin and more comfortable with different children around them, she is not advocating for an acceptance of all people, young and old, who do not have a heteronormative view about gender. Are older, gender-questioning individuals still allowed to be accepted or are they still questioned by children and adults alike as a social stigma? Still policed by the heteronormative need to protect the child, Kilodavis' book sheds light on how to accept children who choose to dress and play in ways that challenge gender stereotypes, but does not explore the possibilities of adult gender choices; the book is clear to describe the Princess Boy's dressing-up like a stereotypical girl as something associated with “play” and “playdates”—not the more adult term of drag (9). By describing gender choices as play, the story still gives a heteronormative excuse for changes in gender performance: it is a juvenile act. Despite the book's mission to make preferential gender expression accepted, it is difficult to completely avoid the heteronormative distrust of those who exist outside of childhood and continue to perform non-traditional gender roles. That is not to say that the book promotes acceptance only of gender-bending children, but the influence of heteronormative hegemony can still be seen as gender expression is never discussed outside the allowably queer time of childhood.

My Princess Boy explores gender trouble by championing the ability to switch gender responsibilities instead of throwing them out entirely. Again, Butler communicates the counterintuitive argument that heteronormative societies produce by

insisting upon a rigid gender identification system. She argues that “it is necessary to consider that sexuality always exceeds any given performance, presentation, or narrative which is why it is not possible to derive or read off a sexuality from any given gender presentation”; that is to say gender identification does not always align with what heteronormative standards require as sexual signifiers (Butler 315). The text that Kilodavis provides for her young readers is in accordance with Butler’s theory that gender is a performative element of normativity. Although Butler goes to the point of arguing that any and all gender should not be implemented because it is itself a performance and not a real element of natural human existence, Kilodavis’ representation of gender as an acceptably fluid concept is an important script to children who are being bombarded by the social teachings of gender subordination. Through literature, Kilodavis is giving children the option to perform whatever identity or gender that they feel most comfortable, or at the very least accept the choices of those children who do choose to perform identities that are not heteronormative. Although she does open the floor to dialogue about accepting others that are different, it is important to recognize that Kilodavis limits her text to the experiences of childhood. This limitation discounts the fact that gender performance continues beyond childhood and—more often than not—is more policed (and therefore more difficult to deviate from) in adulthood. Gender insubordination is reduced to the juvenile, a choice that seems to characterize gender insubordination as something that is limited to the part of a person’s life that is sanctioned by society as an allowably queer time.

Chapter 4

Are You My Mother?: Questioning the Traditional Family Unit

Along with protecting the child, protecting the family has continued to be an anxiety of parents, caregivers, and lawmakers who continue to uphold heteronormative social values. This fear that the family is in danger because of homosexuality or alternative parenting can be seen in such adverse reactions to queer children's texts that depict anything other than traditional nuclear family politics. According to the American Library Association, criticisms about topics related to sexuality and "anti-family" opinions in children's literature make up the majority of formal complaints to the ALA; of the 10,676 formal complaints received by the ALA between 1990 and 2010, 6,621 of them related directly to concerns of representations of non-heteronormative lifestyles ("Numbers" n. pag.). From its first publication in 2005 to the most recent ALA research in 2010, *And Tango Makes Three* by Justin Richardson and Peter Parnell has been the number one banned children's book in the United States because of complaints that it is "anti-family," depicts homosexuality, goes against a "religious viewpoint," promotes "sexism," and is "unsuited to age [the] group" ("Frequently Challenged" n. pag.). Although these complaints make it seem like the book is grossly inappropriate or vulgar, *And Tango Makes Three* is an example of positioning a non-heteronormative relationship within the framework of a traditional heteronormative family narrative.

And Tango Makes Three is a story that revolves around the true life partnering of two male penguins at New York's Central Park Zoo. The penguins, Roy and Silo, were

observed trying to hatch an egg-shaped rock together, so the zookeeper gave them a real egg to hatch and raise. The egg produced Tango, the first baby penguin in New York to have two dads. The book tells of the family's happiness together and attempts to convey a message of acceptance about families with same-sex parents (see fig. 3). Families with same sex parents are just like regular families, the book argues:

There they snuggled together and, like all the other penguins in the penguin house, and all the other animals in the zoo, and all the families in the big city around them, they went to sleep. (Richardson and Parnell 30)

Keeping sexual metaphors present, *And Tango* *Makes Three* brings queerness down to a child's level, which is to say homosexuality is placed within the context of heteronormativity. Although authors Peter Parnell and Justin Richardson are attempting to familiarize children with the homonormative family and, in turn, dispel the stigma of motherless childhoods, they also buy into the heteronormative culture that is oppressing gay parents. Instead of being considered a "family," Tango and his parents Roy and Silo are given the label of "alternative family," that is to say still not a heteronormative family.



Fig. 3. Tango with his two dads

With the obvious absence of a female mother figure, *And Tango Makes Three* as a piece of socially educational children's literature is described as "anti-family" by official complaints to the ALA. However, the traditional, nuclear family (the family style that is so fiercely protected by heteronorms) is not a consistent or absolute model for children today. As is emphasized by today's divorce rates and Census data from 2009, nearly one

in three children in the United States live in non-traditional households—that is to say they live in households that are not of the complete mother, father, and child variety (Kreider and Ellis 4). Since a significant amount of children do not live in a traditional family, complaints that children’s literature like *And Tango Makes Three* are “anti-family” are inherently flawed. If anything, *And Tango Makes Three* is pro-family because it encourages a loving, two-parent household (a traditional heteronormative social standard) with the exception that it is a two-father household. Just as other American children live in homes without mothers, little Tango is able to grow up well-adjusted without having a female mother—“Or, to put in queer terms, by denying the category ‘mother’, we have shown how mothering behavior/performance is not necessarily tied to just the female parent” (Mallan 141). As the occurrence of the traditional nuclear family reduces, people championing heteronormative social standards misplace their frustrations by naming books like *And Tango Makes Three* “anti-family”; they are not anti-family, but are instead anti-heteronormative.

In *And Tango Makes Three* Tango’s parents do the same things as all the other penguin parents, a display of actions that demonstrates both that same-sex parents are “normal,” as well as the suggestion that same sex-parenting cannot really be legitimized unless it is framed by all other heteronormative family rules. Although somewhat normative in its underlying message, the book supports the script of queer utopian theory. A metaphor for real life gay relationships, the plot explores what it means to deviate from heteronormativity and branch out to homonormativity through the penguin characters. Although succumbing to the procreative requirement of heteronormative shame politics, the text encourages support for nonconformity rather than admonishing the protagonists

(like Rumpelstiltskin was) for wanting to world build. This book encourages a script that includes building a queer microcosm, but only if the microcosm is within the heteronormative world. As Warner states, world building in a heterosexually dominated society involves—to a certain level—conforming to heteronormative behavior to avoid the effects of shame: “if you are on the wrong side of the hierarchy you will be stigmatized in a way that could entail real damage” (26). This script delivers the message that being different from the heteronormative model is acceptable, but only if people are willing to adopt (no pun intended) other heteronormative requirements.

Chapter 5

Fairytale Love Stories: Normalizing the Queer

Although parents endeavor to keep their children unaware of sex—a topic deemed by parental complaints to the American Library Association to be unfit for children—their argument that sex is not seen by children is an incredibly flawed one (“Number” n. pag.). In fact, most literature that is given to children is full of sexual implications—heterosexual implications, that is. Princesses marry princes and have babies. Moms and dads sleep in the same bedroom. Characters have siblings. All of these very common instances involve heteronormative ideas of sex; however, they are not criticized as inappropriate for children because they encourage children to accept and desire traditional social roles. The implication of sex is not a problem until it no longer is of the heterosexual variety. This contradiction of sexual acceptance, notes Tison Pugh, author of *Innocence, Heterosexuality, and the Queerness of Children’s Literature*, reduces the validity of the argument that children need to be protected from sex:

Children cannot retain their innocence of sexuality while learning about normative heterosexuality, yet this inherent paradox runs through many classic narratives of children’s literature. [...] This conflicted gesture—of purging sexuality from a text to preserve children’s innocence while nonetheless depicting some form of heterosexuality as childhood’s desired end—reveals the queer foundations of children’s literature. (1-2)

As Pugh rightly contends, children are not asexual creatures, as parents and lawmakers suggest, but rather are more Rousseauian beings who are molded and shaped by the social clues, texts, and stigmas that parents and educators reinforce. Topics that are nearly impossible to completely avoid, sex and sexuality are inherently tied to childhood

because children are constantly being taught and re-taught what good boys and girls grow up to be: adults who have jobs, get married, and have children.

King & King by Dutch authors Linda de Haan and Stern Nijland is an example of children's literature that is framed by the most famous heteronormative narrative: the fairytale. Any child could tell you a fairy tale without a book in front of them because it is so ingrained in the heteronormative upbringing. A princess, in some sort of distress, gets rescued by a handsome prince; the prince is her one true love, they get married, share a kiss at the end of the story, presumably have little princes and princesses, and, most importantly, live happily ever after. Since these tales mimic the traditional heteronormative development of expected adulthood, children are taught that marriage, babies, and happily ever after are the right and proper ways to grow up. Although there is nothing inherently wrong with this heteronormative schedule of events, it may seem to children that the strict fairytale is the only option they should aspire to. Linda de Haan and Stern Nijland use *King & King* to give an alternative to the traditional fairytale: a prince, being forced to marry by his mother, gets rescued by another handsome prince; the prince is his one true love, they get married, share a kiss at the end of the story, and, most importantly, live happily ever after.

In accordance with the traditional fairytale format, the characters of *King & King* are developed through the heteronormative requirement of marriage. As the queen grows tired of ruling over her land and wants to pass it on, she proclaims to her son, "I've had enough! You're getting married and that's all there is to it" (de Haan and Nijland 7-8). Prince Bertie agrees to let his mother bring in potential suitors, but he does not fall in love with any of the visiting princesses. He does, however, fall in love with one

princess's brother—Prince Lee. Thrilled that her son has finally chosen to get married, the queen throws a royal wedding, everyone lives happily ever after (as the stories usually go), and ends on the last page with a kiss (see fig. 4).



Fig. 4. The kings share a hidden kiss

In contrast to nearly all other kisses seen in fairytales, the kiss between Prince Bertie and Prince Lee—then married and considered King and King—was partially censored by de Haan and Nijland. With a heart over their mouths, the King and King expressed their love without going as far as most fairytales do in the realm of sexual references. Unlike Cinderella-esque embraces and deep kisses, the kings express their love in a much more chaste way. Following the fairytale format in every way except for heterosexual marriage, the kings should be right on their way to happily ever after. However, many parental outcries have accused de Haan and Nijland of being inappropriately sexual. Despite the fact that the kings follow along with the heteronormative script and the set of rules that a heteronormative society requires, the two kings are accused of being inappropriately lewd in their representation of love. Banned or taken off shelves in libraries and schools across the nation, *King & King* was the number nine and eight banned book of 2003 and 2004, respectively; those who filed formal complaints with the American Library Association cited “homosexuality” as a theme that was too inappropriate for children to be learning (“Frequently Challenged” n. pag.). This theme of protecting the child, a theme that we

have already discussed in regards to *My Princess Boy* and *And Tango Makes Three*, proves to be a great anxiety for parents with *King & King*. By emphasizing the need to protect children from homosexuality, parents vilify same sex or non-heteronormative couples as a danger to children and to childhood.

For something as innocuous as a hidden kiss, public action has been taken to remove *King & King* and other homosexually themed books from libraries where children can easily access them without parental consent. Going as far as to take legislative action to protect the child, the House of the State of Oklahoma voted to approve House Resolution 1039 in 2005. The Resolution, which passed by a margin of 81-3, required libraries to “confine homosexually themed books and other age-inappropriate material to areas exclusively for adult access and distribution” (“Oklahoma House” n. pag.). Representative Sally Kern (R-Oklahoma City) endorsed the Resolution because she believed that exposing children to homosexuality at an early age would be an inappropriately challenging task: “Expecting six-year-olds to deal with the issue of sexuality is about as realistic as expecting them to carry a 100-pound backpack to school every day” (“Oklahoma House” n. pag.). Harkening back to Tison Pugh’s argument that “Children cannot retain their innocence of sexuality while learning about normative heterosexuality,” Representative Kern’s assertion that six-year-olds do not understand and are not privy to the details of sexuality is inherently faulty. As we have seen through other, more traditional instances of children’s literature, children are exposed to sexuality everywhere. The State of Oklahoma and those making complaints to the American Library Association are, then, not protecting children from sexuality, but are protecting (flawed) heteronormative notions of childhood innocence and heteronormative practices

from other alternatives like homosexuality that stray from the rigid social strictures of heteronormative societies. However, as family structures change and children are exposed in their daily lives to people, parents, and children who are connected with homosexuality or different gender preference, conservative parent groups and lawmakers are missing the point when they censor instances of non-heteronormative behavior. As noted by childhood historian Gary Cross, “The difficulty with using childhood innocence as a battering ram against the cultural or economic status quo is that doing so can obscure the needs of all children” (205). If anything, with the widening influence of media and information disseminated across all sorts of gateways, it is important for children to be exposed to multiple social narratives as more and more children are living in families that deviate from the traditional nuclear family. That being said, not all narratives given to children have the same weight: “any claims to the power of children’s literature to influence readers,” Kerry Mallan, author of *Gender Dilemmas in Children’s Fiction*, argues, “need to be tempered by the understanding that children’s texts are only one part of the many discourses that readers inhabit at any one time” (10). Is a hidden kiss in *King & King* alone really going to tempt the minds of children to stray away from heteronormative social structures? Maybe it will, or maybe it will not. Most importantly, the conversation that is brought about by children’s questions concerning the differences between heteronormative texts and more queer texts is the most important discovery.

Chapter 6

Conclusions

Although traditional children's literature has historically exhibited queer themes, parents and lawmakers have often ignored these themes because childhood has been sanctioned as an allowably queer time. With this allowably queer period, children are given the opportunity to explore and transgress heteronormative expectations as long as they are taught that being an adult in a heteronormative world requires growing up and out of queerness, observing the laws of heteronormativity, and becoming (as Mallan said) who they are supposed to be. Queer children's literature, as seen with *My Princess Boy*, *And Tango Makes Three*, and *King & King*, engages with heteronormative narratives but offers more than one route for children and adults to take. Most of these queer narratives place themselves within the confines of heteronormativity, whether it is through character type (a child playing dress-up), family style (the two-parent family), or narrative framework (the fairytale). Although this adherence to heteronormative conventions might seem (and has been critiqued in this paper) as a bit of a cop-out for yielding to heteronorms, these narratives are still distinctively challenging the status quo. Queer children's literature has challenged normative practices while still appealing to the scripts that children already know. By making queer instances less foreign by situating them in heteronormative scripts, topics like gender bending or homosexuality or same sex parenting seem more natural to children, especially because they are operating within a heteronormatively sanctioned queer time.

Clashes with queer children's literature happen not with children but instead occur with parents or lawmakers that deem queerness to be an inappropriate model to encourage children to grow-up (i.e. become adults) admiring. Since children's literature acts as a script for children to “understand themselves and their relation to the real relations in which they live,” the narratives that children read should give children information about the real world that exists around them—not just the sheltered world that their parents want (Mallan 8). Since parents and lawmakers—those outside of the allowably queer time—are the ones who object most to queer children's literature and who hold on so tightly to heteronormative standards, queer children's literature is just as much for the parents as it is for the children. Parents are not necessarily protecting children from gender bending or homosexuality, but instead are trying to protect their heteronormative lifestyle to pass on to their children. There is no inherent danger to children with gender bending or homosexuality, but encouraging children to be tolerant of and participate in non-heteronormative ways of life does put the dominance of heteronormative social rules in danger. Acting as a didactic tool to encourage tolerance and social diversity, queer children's literature goes beyond the underlying queerness of traditional children's literature to encourage change in both parents and children instead of purely delivering narrative for entertainment or social complacency.

And Tango Makes Three and *King & King*, the two most contested pieces of children's literature, take a different approach to persuading children and parents alike that homosexuality is not a threat to children or the family. Instead of asserting that different is just as good if not better (like *My Princess Boy* tries to say), *And Tango Makes Three* and *King & King* frame homosexuality within the most stringent of

heteronorms of marriage and family life. These two books assert that same sex couples might be “a little bit different” than the norm, but they are not a danger to the most valued heteronorms: children and marriage (Richardson and Parnell 9). In fact, both books promote happy childhoods and stable marriages. Unlike Prince Bertie’s mother who proclaims that when she “was [his] age, [she’d] been married twice already,” the Kings are married and live happily ever after together, just like their heteronormative counterparts (de Haan and Nijland 8). Although positioning homosexuality within heteronormative narratives can be inherently limiting to queerness itself, the authors of both *And Tango Makes Three* and *King & King* create a homonormativity that should be accessible to parents who are wary of introducing and discussing homosexuality with their children. Aware that their audience is changing from child-only to child and parent together, Richardson and Parnell and de Haan and Nijland make their queer literature more accessible to those with mainstream concerns about being open with children about sexuality.

Despite the minor limitations of gender fluidity in Kilodavis’ queer children’s text, the most important message given to parents in *My Princess Boy* is expressed with one word: *My*. Through her title and the story itself, Kilodavis takes explicit ownership of (and pride in) her child who is not practicing traditional heteronormative gender expressions. This book does encourage children to treat other children who are different (whether by gender preference or any other stigma) with respect; however, and rather more importantly, it also teaches parents to do the same and express respect for those who choose to live outside heteronorms. Since children are given social cues and texts by the adults around them, adults must be the first line of teaching children to respect and

accept others who are different—not only children who are different. By encouraging parents to admit and declare that their children have different gender preferences, Kilodavis creates just as much of a didactic tool for parents to teach themselves how to treat and accept children that are different as she does a tool to teach their children about children that are different. This transfer of audience of queer children’s texts—from a child being taught about social differences to parents being taught how to accept and teach social differences—seems to denote a new pattern in parenting practices. Although resisting gender norms and heteronormative social rules is by no means considered mainstream—as noted by the fact that the American Library Association even has a yearly Banned Books list—it is important to recognize that *My Princess Boy* has never been on the Banned Books list. Unlike other queer texts like *And Tango Makes Three* and *King & King*, *My Princess Boy* has been greatly publicized without being so emphatically criticized. A new trend in acceptance-motivated parenting has been publicized in the past decade, as seen, for example, by public support of a 2011 J.Crew advertisement featuring a young boy wearing pink nail polish. As seen in a *New York Times* article about childhood gender performances, many parents are making greater effort to accept non-heteronormative behaviors instead of shaming their children:

“Ten years ago, the gender and sexual meaning of young children’s behavior was only discussed by a small handful of developmental psychologists,” said Arlene Istar Lev, a family therapist in Albany. “Children who expressed that were silenced and their parents were ashamed of them: ‘You will *not* walk out of the house that way.’” (Hoffman n. pag.)

Traditional notions of shame and embarrassment have long prevented children from expressing gender preferences that vary from traditional boy and girl stereotypes;

however, the acceptance and popularity of books like *My Princess Boy* gives hope for a less heteronormatively stringent childhood.

When comparing traditional children's literature with today's overtly queer children's literature, there are evident parallels between the underlying queerness of traditional children's literature and modern queer narratives. Curiously, parents and lawmakers today choose to condone (or ignore) the queerness in traditional children's literature while condemning modern queer children's literature to be overly sexualized or thematically inappropriate. This contradiction in queerness—allowing traditional queerness but not modern queerness—demonstrates a parental fear that children and the family need protected from changing times. Through protests of queerness like the State of Oklahoma's Resolution to put queer children's books in adult-only areas, adult anxieties about queerness and its influence on children really seems to be a misplaced anxiety about preserving heteronormative social structures. At the same time that conservative parents are vehemently prohibiting queer literatures in schools and homes, more tolerant parents are using queer literature to teach themselves how to scrutinize heteronormative standards and teach their children to be accepting of their peers and adults that are not adhering to heteronormative limits.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Altenbaugh, Richard J. *Historical Dictionary of American Education*. Greenwood, 1999.
- Barrie, J. M., and Jack Zipes. *Peter Pan*. New York: Penguin, 2004. Print.
- Butler, Judith. "Imitation and Gender Insubordination." *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*. Ed. Henry Abelove, Michele Aina Barale and David M. Halperin. New York: Routledge, 1993. 307-20.
- Bronski, Michael. "A Dream Is a Wish Your Heart Makes: Notes on the Materialization of Sexual Fantasy." *Leatherfolk: Radical Sex, People, Politics, And Practice*. Ed. Mark Thompson. Los Angeles: Daedalus, 2004. 56-64.
- Cross, Gary S. *The Cute and the Cool: Wondrous Innocence and Modern American Children's Culture*. Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.
- "Frequently Challenged Books of the 21st Century." *American Library Association*. Accessed February 10, 2013.
<<http://www.ala.org/advocacy/banned/frequentlychallenged/21stcenturychallenged>>.
- Grimm, Brothers and Paul O. Zelinsky. *Rumpelstiltskin*. Puffin, 1996.
- Haan, Linda de, and Stern Nijland. *King & King*. Berkeley: Tricycle Press, 2002.
- Hoffman, Jan. "Boys Will Be Boys? Not in These Families." *The New York Times*, June 10, 2011, sec. Fashion & Style.
<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/12/fashion/new-challenge-for-parents-childrens-gender-roles.html>.
- Kilodavis, Cheryl. "My Princess Boy - Homepage." 2012. Web. 13 Oct. 2012.
<<http://www.myprincessboy.com>>.

- Kilodavis, Cheryl, and Suzanne DeSimone. *My Princess Boy*. New York: Simon & Schuster Children's, 2010.
- Kreider, Rose M., and Renee Ellis. "Living Arrangements of Children: 2009." United States Census Bureau, June 2011.
- Mallan, Kerry. *Gender Dilemmas in Children's Fiction*. Basingstoke [England] ; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.
- Newbery, John. *A Little Pretty Pocket-Book (Illustrated Edition)*. Ill. Dodo Press, 2009.
- Newman, Lesléa, and Diana Souza. *Heather Has Two Mommies: 20th Anniversary Edition*. 20 Anv. Alyson Books, 2009.
- Nissenbaum, Stephen. *The Battle for Christmas*. 1st ed. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996.
- "Number of Challenges by Year, Reason, Initiator & Institution (1990 - 2010)." *American Library Association*. Accessed February 10, 2013.
<<http://www.ala.org/advocacy/banned/frequentlychallenged/stats>>.
- "Oklahoma House of Representatives Passes Anti-Gay Book Ban." *SIECUS (Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States)*. Accessed March 15, 2013.
<<http://www.siecus.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=Feature.showFeature&featureid=1279&pageid=483&parentid=478>>.
- Pugh, Tison. *Innocence, Heterosexuality, and the Queerness of Children's Literature*. Children's Literature and Culture. New York: Routledge, 2011.
- Richardson, Justin, Peter Parnell, and Henry Cole. *And Tango Makes Three*. New York: Simon & Schuster for Young Readers, 2005.
- "Top 100 Banned/Challenged Books: 2000-2009." *American Library Association*. Accessed February 10, 2013. <http://www.ala.org/advocacy/banned/frequentlychallenged/challengedbydecade/2000_2009>.

Warner, Michael. *The Trouble with Normal*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2000.

ACADEMIC VITA

Maeve E. Klutch

309 East Beaver Avenue, Apt. 706

State College, PA 16801

mek5238@psu.edu

Education

B.A, English, May 2013, The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, Pennsylvania

Honors and Awards

- President's Freshman Award for Academic Excellence, The Pennsylvania State University, March 2010.
- The Gold Key Award, the Scholastic Writing Awards, June 2008

Association Memberships/Activities

- Phi Beta Kappa Honors Society
- Student Society for Indigenous Knowledge (President)
- Schreyer Literary Committee (Outreach Chair)

Professional Experience

- **Undergraduate Editorial Intern, Department of English**

The Pennsylvania State University, August 2010-May 2011

- Performed textual collations, located textual variants, and producing electronic versions of each edition of *Portrait of a Lady* by Henry James for a Cambridge scholarly edition

- Expanded editorial skill set by handling and conducting research with the original 19th century manuscripts
- **Editorial and Production Intern**
TABLE Magazine and MCM Communications, Pittsburgh, PA, May 2011-August 2011
 - Expanded communication and professional skill set by working with local cooking schools and small business owners to produce collaborative workshops and events for the magazine's readers
 - Extended writing skills by editing and writing for multiple audiences, including publication in the summer 2011 newsletters and magazine
 - Utilized marketing tools like Media Audit and social media to advertise more skillfully to the magazine's audience
- **Bednar Intern**
 Paterno Library at The Pennsylvania State University, January 2012-Present
 - Acts as an intermediary between the Social Sciences Library and the Interinstitutional Consortium for Indigenous Knowledge (ICIK) to create monthly programming
 - Creates press releases, pamphlets, fliers, and other promotional material for monthly lecture series
 - Improves web writing skills by generating a new and user-friendly ICIK website

Research Interests

I have broad interests in publishing and editing that relate to market interest and popularity. Specifically, much of my research interest is focused on special populations, more precisely populations that are minorities or under-represented in traditional American culture.