



Tomboys

by Ruth M. Pettis

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The word *tomboy*, like the behavior it designates, has crossed gender and class barriers. At one point in its history it even changed sex.

In the sixteenth century, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, it referred to a rude or boisterous boy. By the next century, however, it had come to mean "a bold or immodest woman," most likely unchaste. Concurrently, it was also applied to girls who behaved like rowdy boys: wild, rough, and uncouth. By the late 1800s it had come to mean simply a frolicsome girl given to sport and other boyish ways.

Related words are *hoyden*--another term that changed sex, by the eighteenth century, from awkward fellow to a boisterous, ill-bred girl--and *gamine* (of French origin)--a playful or mischievous girl of the streets.

In the United States, the word began appearing in child-rearing advice books after the Civil War. Many recommended exercise and outdoor play for girls in order to inculcate the resourcefulness, competence, and physical health demanded by vigorous motherhood. Sharon O'Brien postulates that this was a response to the emergence of "hysterical" ailments among middle-class women.

In her examination of the tomboy childhoods of temperance activist Frances Willard and writers Willa Cather and Louisa May Alcott, O'Brien cites recurring elements: rural settings; indulgence of one or both parents (or, conversely, parental restrictions in the case of Alcott's lack of success in breaking away); bookishness or academic skills (feeding both ambition and imagination); and a strong childhood wish for notable accomplishment.

It is probably not surprising that sex-role pioneers such as aviators Blanche Stuart Scott and Amelia Earhart, and athletes Babe Didrikson Zaharias and Picabo Street had tomboy childhoods. But so did actresses Charlotte Cushman, Ava Gardner, and Katherine Hepburn, blues singer Gladys Bentley, and New York Senator Hilary Rodham Clinton.

Once a derogatory slur, the tomboy designation has emerged as an icon of female non-conformance and resiliency.

Tomboyism and Gender

Much of the psychological literature on tomboyism is in the context of studying the relationships of childhood "cross-sex" behaviors and adult homosexuality, transsexuality, or other gender-related outcomes.

Grellert, Newcomb, and Bentler report a number of associations between sex-typed childhood behaviors and adult sexual orientation, while Whitam and Mathy find such correlations to be comparable in four different societies. Phillips and Over report that while associations between sexual orientation and recalled tomboyism exist, they are not reliable predictors of lesbianism. Kennedy and Davis note the early occurrence of masculine-identified traits among many of the butch lesbians in their study, who felt they

were born that way, but not among those who identified as femme.

Whether or not tomboyism is associated with adult lesbianism depends on its definition. Saghir and Robins found a high correlation with lesbianism (70%), but based this both on preference for boys' activities and aversion to girls' activities. When enjoyment of boys' activities is considered alone, the percentage of reported childhood tomboyism among adult women in general is relatively high: 51% to 67% (Hyde, Rosenberg, and Behrman; Mogan).

Studies such as these have established that some degree of tomboy behavior or identification has long been a common feature of girlhood. Hyde, Rosenberg, and Behrman term it an "active thrust" preceding transition to adult passivity. Halberstam, however, considers it "an extended childhood period of female masculinity," and takes a grimmer view than others cited here on the suppression and reorientation of girls' gender diversity at puberty.

Ehrhardt, Grisanti, and McCauley compare the frequency of specific childhood gender-atypical behaviors recalled by female-to-male transsexuals and lesbians and conclude that tomboyism, though prevalent in both groups, is neither an indicator nor a predictor of gender identity confusion. Zucker and Bradley advise those treating gender identity disorders in girls on how to distinguish these from "normal" tomboyism. Rottnek provides an extensive treatment of childhood gender disorder that includes several tomboy perspectives.

Burn, O'Neil, and Nederend argue that tomboy behaviors help girls acquire traits such as assertiveness and self-reliance that become useful in adulthood. Hilgenkamp and Livingston link self-perceptions of being a tomboy with "masculine" traits such as competitiveness and leadership ability, and postulate a correlation with expectations of career success.

There have been some indications--as in the study by Bailey, Bechtold, and Berenbaum--that tomboy behavior, as well as female gender disorder, is linked with mothers' prenatal testosterone levels, but longitudinal data has been difficult to obtain.

Insights from Research on Tomboys

Plumb and Cowan's research illustrates one hazard of studying childhood cross-sex activity. They investigate the greater willingness of girls than boys to cross sex-role barriers, leading to the "destereotyping" of traditionally boys' activities. While girls in their study were asked if they were tomboys (more than half reported yes), the researchers did not ask a comparable question of boys because they could not come up with a corresponding label that was emotionally neutral for them.

Carr uses "tomboy narratives" to study the influence of individual "agency" ("the power to intervene in a course of events or state of affairs") on the development of gender identification. She cites passages from 14 interviews and concludes that the former tomboys in her study were not merely "impressionable receptors" of socialization, but made significant choices regarding their degree of conformance.

Carr's study is also useful for its overview of previous research and hypotheses about tomboys, her consideration of masculinity and androgyny, and her cognizance of the influence of normative judgments on the part of researchers (including feminists) on their analysis.

Bailey, Bechtold, and Berenbaum have begun a longitudinal study of girls identified by their parents as tomboys, to be followed through adolescence along with their siblings. Their critique of prior research on tomboys points out a number of limitations that they hope to address through a long-term, prospective approach.

They have developed a "Tomboy Composite" scale as a means to characterize objectively the degree to

which tomboys differ from their gender-conforming siblings. They anticipate that the data they collect can provide insight on sex differences. For example, if boys' greater degree of "visio-spatial" ability results from play activity, testing tomboy girls for this ability can provide useful comparisons.

Of ironically humorous note is Green's comment that when he and his associates sought funding from the National Institute of Mental Health in 1982 for a study similar to that by Bailey, Bechtold, and Berenbaum, they were turned down by a psychiatrist who considered the term "tomboy" to be pejorative.

Overshadowing all these studies are changing social attitudes about gender roles. Determining femininity from "expressive" qualities (such as compassion and sensitivity) and masculinity from "instrumental" ones (assertiveness or self-reliance), still begs the question of culturally determined influences on child-rearing practices. Moreover, formerly male-dominated spheres such as sports and the trades have seen significant increases in female participation since the 1970s and are less associated nowadays with "boyish" girls or "mannish" women.

Indeed, whether or not "tomboy" will continue to be a meaningful designation as sex and gender roles evolve remains to be seen.

Tomboys in Popular Culture

When asked to name tomboy characters from literature, most people immediately recall Jo March from Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*. That fact inspired the title of an engaging anthology, *Jo's Girls: Tomboy Tales of High Adventure, True Grit, and Real Life* (1997). In her introduction, editor Christian McEwen surveys spunky female protagonists in children's and adult literature from the 1800s to the present, and has taken pains to carry her search beyond white, North American sources. The result is a collection of fiction, memoir, and essays from noted and lesser-known women writers. McEwen's bibliography lists scores of related titles.

Recent short fiction, poetry, and imagery celebrating tomboys "who grew up to be lesbians" are compiled in Yamaguchi and Barber's *Tomboys! Tales of Dyke Derring-do* (1995). Acknowledging their own rambunctious girlhoods, the editors have assembled many perspectives on the relationship of a tomboy past to adult lesbian identity.

Halberstam carries the discussion of gender identity from eighteenth-century "peripheral sexualities" into the post-modern territory of drag king performance. En route she examines the tomboy in film history as a precursor to later cinematic butch archetypes. Olson provides another survey of tomboy movies as part of a wider look at butch and female-to-male identities in Burana and Due's anthology *Dagger: On Butch Women*.

Throughout their history, tomboys have had to contend with the stigma of presumed lesbianism or the accusation of wanting to be male. Both assumptions were categorically refuted by twentieth-century psychology, which established the normalcy of the tomboy experience among girls of all identities. However, for many, the tomboy stage is the first manifestation of a gender-fluid life journey.

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