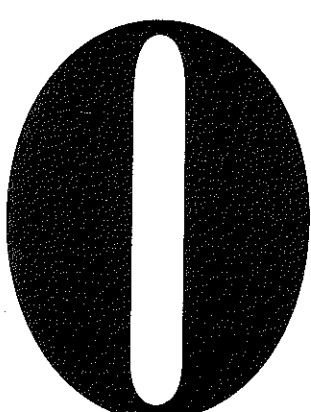




Karen Klugman



Our culture is mass culture, where one of the strongest early influences on gender is the mass toy market. It is appalling that today there is a much greater sexual division of toys defined by very particular gender traits than I'd say has ever existed before. The recuperation of sex roles in the eighties is a stunning reversal of the Women's Movement in the late sixties and early seventies, which called into question children's sex role modeling. Dress codes were condemned, co-ed sports flourished, fairy tales were rewritten, and toys were liberated. We tend to imagine that our parents and grandparents conformed to strict sex role modeling practices. And we like to think that the cultural turmoil of the sixties changed everything. This is not true. In mass culture today masculinity

and femininity are more narrowly defined than ever. Walk into any toy store and you will see in the aisle arrangement the strict separation of the sexes along specific gender lines: Barbies, My Little Ponies, and She-Ras line one aisle; He Mans, Transformers and Thundercats another. Although many nursery schools now mix the dolls and trucks on their play area shelves, everyone — kids especially — perceives toys as originating in a boy vs girl context.

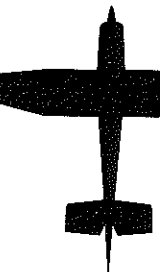
Commodity fetishism erases production and presents the toy store (or TV commercial) as the toy's point of origin. Children generally refuse to believe that the writing on a doll's back says "Mattell" rather than the doll's name. They do not conceive of the toy ever having been made. It has no reality previous to its display on the toy store shelf where it conforms, as if by magic, to a clearly gendered universe. The logic of a boy vs girl universe is not questioned or even understood as having been produced because the labour of stocking the shelves is largely performed after hours. Young children conceive of gender from the point of view of the consumer. This is the same

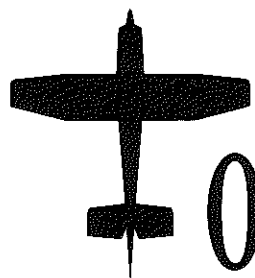
point of view that perceives the bank solely as a window that dispenses cash whenever you run out. Parents who try to explain the realities of cheques and savings deposits quickly realize how difficult it is in consumer society to restore notions of production. In the toy store, the essentialized notion of gender (and the boy vs girl universe) fall apart only when the mass-produced toy falls out of favour. Reduced for quick sale, it is thrown helter skelter in a "Sale" basket with other out-of-favour toys where gender, like the toy itself, no longer matters.

In order to highlight the retrenchment of gender in the eighties, I want to cite two people whose experience of childhood is more immediate than my own. The first is my daughter Cassie, who almost a decade ago when she was three was asked if her teddy bear was a boy or a girl. She responded, "My teddy is both a boy and a girl." Her words give simple and direct testimony to the pre-oedipal child's recognition of polymorphous, or multidimensional sexuality. Yet just the other day, my four year old son, Cade, made a very different comment. He was playing with some foam rubber dinosaurs, whose sexual

characteristics are in a teddy bear. I said, "just boys and dinosaurs were gir said, "just boys and his remark suggest masculine and fem words affirm that b and play with boys evidence to sugges our society are mo differences in their con than lit dom reprimand litt dress-up in boys' o all the day-care tea with report that mo some degree of dis ally rebuke and vic young sons who ex and gowns while p However, I think th between my two ch has more to do with comment reflects th while Cade's speak eighties and the abs of gender based on notions of sex.

Consider Barbie and popularity demonstr are socialized as co physical attributes defined in our socie withstood the decad pert nose, frozen sm hard body and penc legs. In contrast, He trouble surviving tw His position as top taken over by Lion- TV series and GI Joe from the Viet Nam e precarious fame is a rapid changeover in market. He-Man last year, next year some endary" folk hero w future. What's impo spin-off toys is that the same basic mode ferent costume and a super powers. But al with muscles and a helpers who battle a and mythic army of





Susan Willis

TOYS & GENDER

characteristics are as erased as they are in a teddy bear. I asked him if his dinosaurs were girls and boys. "No", he said, "just boys and boys." In its syntax, his remark suggests the possibility for masculine and feminine, even while his words affirm that boys can only be boys and play with boys. There is some evidence to suggest that little boys in our society are more strongly determined in their conception of sex role differences than little girls. Parents seldom reprimand little girls for playing dress-up in boys' or men's clothing. But all the day-care teachers I've spoken with report that most parents show some degree of displeasure (occasionally rebuke and violence) for their young sons who experiment with skirts and gowns while playing dress-up. However, I think the real difference between my two children's remarks has more to do with history. Cassie's comment reflects the mid seventies, while Cade's speaks for the mid-eighties and the absolute retrenchment of gender based on essentialized notions of sex.

Consider Barbie and He-Man. Their popularity demonstrates how children are socialized as consumers, and their physical attributes show how gender is defined in our society. Barbie has withstood the decades with the same pert nose, frozen smile, pointy breasts, hard body and pencil long and thin legs. In contrast, He-Man is having trouble surviving two marketing years. His position as top boy toy has been taken over by Lion-O of the ThunderCat TV series and GI Joe, who has returned from the Viet Nam era. He-Man's precarious fame is a product of the rapid changeover in the mass toy market. He-Man last year, Lion-O this year, next year some new "already legendary" folk hero without a past or a future. What's important in these TV spin-off toys is that they all derive from the same basic model. Each has a different costume and a different range of super powers. But all are young men with muscles and a mythic group of helpers who battle an equally muscled and mythic army of evil-doers. My ref-

erence to He-Man is, thus, a reference to this particular model of toy whose specific appearance depends on which legendary folk hero is currently being promoted in TV programming.

Barbie and He-Man are both most popular with a particular age group of consumers. From my observations, I'd say four and five year old boys want He-Man, whereas girls from five to seven want Barbie. (These ages are confirmed by the appearance of the children in the TV commercials for these toys.) No longer toddlers and not yet beginning to experience puberty, this age group represents in our society true childhood. Clearly, Barbie and He-Man do not offer the child the possibility of prolonging polymorphous sexuality or developing an open notion about gendering. Instead, they define the polarization of narrowly conceived gender possibilities. My hypothesis is that both toys play on the child's conscious and unconscious notions about adolescence. They focus the child's conception of the transformations associated with adolescence in a singular fashion, and they suggest that change is somehow bound up in commodity consumption.

Advanced capitalist society offers the growing child very few means to register the experience of individual development and bodily change except by way of commodity consumption. In the United States ritual ceremonies that mark stages of growth and integration with the adult world, like the Jewish barmitzvah or Catholic communion, are marginalized, diminished or assimilated to the commodity form. While the First World tends to perceive the rites of passage in primitive societies as backward or barbaric, these do satisfy the individual's need to focus the fears, excitement, and expectations associated with moments of change and to overcome these through group-social practice. We may lack rites of passage, but we have not transcended the need to experience ourselves and our changes in relation to a larger social collectivity.

For most people growing up in the First World state, the birthday is the moment when the individual intersects with the desire for social gratification. We tend to experience our birthdays as moments ripe for the reinvention of social rituals. This is especially true of children. They plan and discuss and imagine their birthday parties months in advance. Most often they talk about who will be invited to their parties, not as an exclusionary, but an inclusionary practice. In naming their guests, children are in touch with the social group who will observe their moment of transformation. It is important that the social group represent continuity, hence children tell each other who will come to their parties all year round.

Children live their birthdays as magical moments of change even if they are not celebrated with a party. Many children undergo emotion-fraught weeks leading up to their birthdays. When my daughter Stacy turned five, she demonstrated all the behaviours generally ascribed to women turning forty: sleeplessness, depression, touchiness. For children, birthdays are more than transitional moments. They are felt to include actual physical transformation. I have heard more than my own children ask to be measured upon awakening on their birthdays, fully expecting to have grown an inch in the night.

Adolescence is the period when growth really does mean change. Young children anticipate adolescence both consciously and unconsciously. In consumer society their anticipations are met more quickly and easily by commodities than by social institutions like family and schools. Commodities offer the young child a means to articulate his or her notions about the transition to adolescence. No matter what the adult (probably male) toy manufacturers had in mind when they created Barbie, she represents for the six-year old girl the acquisition of the adult female body. Her accentuated length suggests height, which is the young child's most basic way of conceptualiz-

Young Children conceive of gender from the point of view of the consumer

with the phallus. He-Man is a part of this tradition. But for the young boy of four or five, muscles mean muscles. He-Man's muscles bulge so grotesquely that my own son first called them "bumps". This is the commodity's one-dimensional definition of masculinity. It seizes one of the characteristics children associate with adolescence — a visible and controllable aspect (boys can work out with weights and control the size of their muscles) — and makes this one trait the place of the complexities it negates. Another toy currently marketed for young boys is a voice-transforming machine. The boy speaks into it and his childlike voice comes out dramatically deepened, although slightly roboticized. Like developing

economic exchange. We consume with our eyes, taking in commodities every time we push a grocery cart up and down the aisles in a supermarket, or watch TV, or drive down a logostudded highway.

What the child does with a commodity is another situation entirely. An analysis of the way children play with Barbie and He-Man would alone fill a book. Barbie can slide down avalanches just as He-Man can become the inhabitant of a two story Victorian doll house. I've observed such situations where play disrupts gender roles, and day care teachers can describe thousands more. Ivan Illich suggests an interesting way to understand the function of play in his book *Gender*, when he characterizes women's domestic labor as the work of putting "utility" into the hollow commodities that fill up daily life. As he describes it women's "shadow work" transforms the meaningless store-bought egg into an ingredient for a meal, which then constitutes social relationships and wholeness. Leaving aside the nostalgic tendency in Illich's writing, I'd say children's play functions along these lines. Children transform these lines into use values. What's more, they don't recreate lost values or utility, as Illich would have the contemporary housewife do by somehow dredging up the long lost relationship of the peasant woman to the freshly laid egg. Rather, children's play produces newly imagined social possibilities, where gender is no longer the most essential attribute, but only one quality among many other interesting human features.

A closer look at the moment of consumption demonstrates that no matter how deeply it articulates our inscription in capitalism, it also includes utopian dimensions, particularly for children. Buying is a form of exchange where the social interaction that defined older systems like barter is reduced to the universal equivalent: money. In buying Barbie or He-Man, the young child is able to experience the transition to adolescence as an act of consumption. However, because young children do not control money and have not been taught to think abstractly, the child's experience of consumption is somewhat different from that of the adult. Even if the child performs the purchase with money he or she received as a gift or an allowance, the moment of exchange includes dimensions of play acting, of mimicking what adults do when they hand dollar bills to the clerk and get change back.

For children, the moment of consumption, which for adults is focussed primarily on pocketbook and cash register, is expanded to embrace the

child's peer group or a young girl buys Barbie as a Christmas present, she experiences in relation to a collection of girls who have or want acts of consumption. They all have the same desire for social exhibition in their birthday parties. For the practice of consumption is competition. "Keeping Joneses" is the fully commodified version of a sense of collectivity. Often adults believe that as other kids is a desire for greed or rivalry. A young girl already has He-Man and an assortment of their roommates may well ask not because he wants a GI Joe or Rambo to be and-tell". While such a child is being conditioned by consume, and consume child is simultaneously desire to participate in the world and experience. Children enjoy "sleeping in their friend's house, and you often look forward to the first "sleep overs". To break down the nuclear family and to restructure themselves of caring. By playing with toys, eating at his or her friend's TV, and at his friend's bedroom and makes the notion of family a concrete experience. Children's play transforms into use values; so too is the relationship to consumption a utopian social dimension.

These examples of the dimensions that haunt consumption are all impoverished by the larger system of young children recognizing their speech and play as children's experience. It is less immediate (because neither producers nor reproducers) and because it is simply less local. It is not to essentialize children as the equivalent of some nature or state, but rather the child's perspective on historical and social. It comes into the world of adults and older siblings. Their experience is primarily an experience of social interaction.

ing age or adulthood. And her accentuated breasts signify — directly and simply — femininity. Clearly, six-year-old girls sense that adulthood and femininity are far more complex. If only through their parents, they experience the labour, care, worries, discussions, desires and satisfactions that constitute adulthood. If only through their mothers, they know the shapes, softness, rhythms, odours and expressions that define femininity.

Barbie negates all of these, just as He-Man reduces adult masculinity to the simple formula of hard, overly muscled body. Popular culture includes a long tradition of male superheroes, such as Superman, Captain America and Batman, whose physical strength and super powers imply the penis and give expression to the domination associated

muscles for the first time, voice change can be a traumatic experience for the adolescent boy. The voice-transforming machine teaches young boys that commodities have an easy answer for what would otherwise be a difficult, perhaps painful situation. The familial relationships that might help a child through awkward periods of development are put aside, supplanted by a magical machine available at just over ten dollars.

In analyzing the relationship between adolescence and commodities, I am focussing on a single moment in the child's relationship with the toy. This is the moment when desire is enacted in consumption. It does not matter whether the child actually buys the toy or merely voices desire, "I want that!". In advanced consumer society, the act of consumption need not involve



child's peer group of playmates. When a young girl buys Barbie or receives Barbie as a Christmas or birthday present, she experiences consumption in relation to a collectivity of young girls who have or want Barbies. In their acts of consumption, children enact the same desire for social collectivity as they exhibit in their preparations for birthday parties. For adults, the social practice of consumption is reduced to competition. "Keeping up with the Joneses" is the fully deformed and commodified version of the child's sense of collectivity in consumption. Often adults believe their young children's desires to have the same toys as other kids is a demonstration of greed or rivalry. A young boy who already has He-Man, Lion-O and an assortment of their respective help-mates may well ask for GI Joe or Rambo, not because he wants a more militaristic toy, but because a friend brought his GI Joe or Rambo to school for "show-and-tell". While such a child is indeed being conditioned by capitalism to consume, and consume massively, the child is simultaneously voicing the desire to participate in his friend's world and experience. Similarly, many children enjoy "sleeping over" at a friend's house, and young children often look forward to and discuss their first "sleep overs". This is how children break down the nuclear family and restructure themselves in a collectivity of caring. By playing with the friend's toys, eating at his or her table, watching the friend's TV, and sleeping in the friend's bedroom and bed, the child makes the notion of the extended family a concrete experience. Just as children's play transforms commodities into use values; so too, does children's relationship to consumption reveal utopian social dimensions.

These examples of the social dimensions that haunt commodity consumption are all impoverished and contained by the larger system of capitalism. If young children recognize these social dimensions and bring them forth in their speech and play, while adults are blind and inured to them, it is because children's experience of capitalism is less immediate (because they are neither producers nor for the most part reproducers) and because their experience is simply less long. My intent is not to essentialize childhood, to make it the equivalent of some basic human nature or state, but rather to show how the child's perspective is precisely historical and social. Because children come into the world dependent upon adults and older siblings for their care, their experience is primarily the experience of social interaction and

relationships. Socialization into capitalism is a process of learning to substitute alienation and commodities for human relationships. When children recognize utopian social dimensions in otherwise highly commodified situations, they challenge us all to liberate the social from the commodity form. This is the same challenge Marx made to the working class in the nineteenth century to recognize and seize the buried human relationships in labour and in the products of labour which have been abstracted and alienated by wage labour and the commodity form.

The challenge is how to define gender in truly human terms. This may not be

In their acts of consumption, children enact the same desire for social collectivity as they exhibit in their preparations for birthday parties.



possible under capitalism where group social practice is commodity consumption. If we subscribe to the notion of gendering as process — and I think this is the only fruitful way to see it — then we must confront the fact that gender, like all our attributes and expressions, is bound up with the commodity form. As I see it there are two possible responses. The first: the separatist solution, holds forth limited success. In a society defined by sexism and male domination, lesbian separatism functions at the level of sexuality in a fashion similar to a homesteading community with respect to capitalist production and commodity consumption. Both represent a political choice, but neither is transformative of society as a whole. The problem with the separatist solution is its marginality. Either it is so different from dominant

culture as to have no impact on the rest of society, or it includes points of attraction for capitalism in which case it is readily co-opted and assimilated. The most to be gained from separatism is reform. Lesbian separatism can stimulate tolerance for alternative sexuality but it cannot transform male domination in society at large. Similarly, communities based on alternative modes of production can promote an awareness of less exploitative economies and non-polluting energy sources, but these communities are not transformative of either capitalist economics or its relationship to petrochemicals,

nuclear arms or computer chips.

The most radical response to daily life under capitalism is to develop a mode of criticism and practice along the lines I have been demonstrating here. This is a more difficult activity because, lacking separation and autonomy, the culture critic risks being engulfed or simply dismayed by the contradictions he or she seeks to reveal. Nevertheless, there is a real need to recognize in all our commodified practices and situations the fragmented and buried manifestations of utopian social relationships. Such a practice meets the challenge Herbert Marcuse set forth in his *One-Dimensional Man*. It takes his critique of capitalist culture one step further into daily life and one step deeper into the commodity form. This is a truly transformative approach to capitalist culture because it has the power to unlock the desire for liberating social relationships from within the system itself.

I want to expand what I have been saying about the individual's experience of commodities and gender, which I have defined primarily in terms of social practice, by rethinking these considerations in relation to a larger historical context. My hypothesis is that just as children want to experience their individual changes concretely and socially; I would say that so too does society as a whole long to experience change and to register change historically. Because young children's notions of change have largely to do with growing up and becoming adults their sense of change is localized in adolescence and articulated in relation to gender and sexuality. The question is: what then, are the historical equivalents of the sort of changes individuals experience in their lifetimes? Is change even conceivable under capitalism?

Theodor Adorno, in writing the great critique of the eighteenth century Enlightenment, posed this same question and responded by attacking the notion of progress. For Adorno and the other Marxist intellectuals of the Frankfurt School, time and history under capitalism are portrayed as an abhorrent and bleak sameness that recapitulates domination. Homogeneous time is how Walter Benjamin characterized capitalism's negation of change. It is a history propelled by the notion of progress, but going nowhere. Instead of change, capitalism is punctuated by events, like moon shots and scientific discoveries; or by the horror of events, like nuclear holocaust. True there are struggles for change: Civil Rights, the Women's Movement, anti-nuke and anti-war movements. But in a history dominated by progress these

struggles can yield no more than reform.

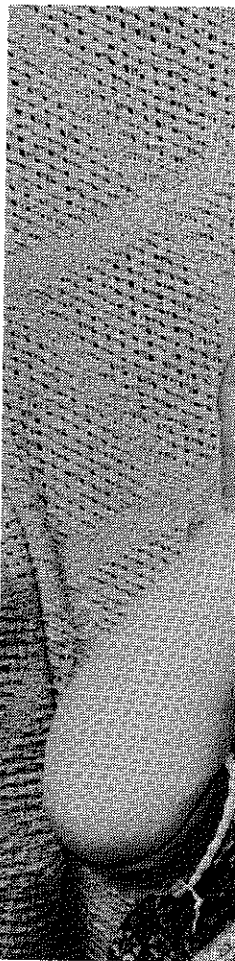
"Everything transforms but nothing changes" is a fitting motto for late-twentieth-century capitalism, particularly as it is embodied in the mass toy market. One hundred years from now, when anthropologists from another planet visit the earth and begin poking around in the heaped up residues of our culture, they will find buried in the stratum marked 1980's a vast array of toys whose singular purpose is to transform. Trucks, planes, boats, tanks, cars, helicopters, space vehicles and submarines all turn into robots. Some robots turn into lions, insects or dinosaurs. These are the Transformers, Gobots and Dinobots. Often the complicated series of manipulations required to produce the transformation from car to robot and back to car again baffle the adult left reading the toy's instructions while the four year old child, using fingers and intuition, performs the transformation unaided. What's interesting about the Transformers is the way the notion of transformation suggests spontaneity and change, while the reality of the toy teaches programme and pre-programmed outcome. As the child's fingers fold in axles and wheels and pull out arms and legs, he or she learns that change is already inscribed in the machine. The Popple is an ugly sort of teddy bear in blotched pastels and with a comical pouch sewn into its back. By turning the animal head over heels and stuffing it into its own pouch, the child turns the Popple into a ball. Such toys demonstrate that consumption is essential for transformation. Further, their programming undermines the possibility of conceptualizing change in any other way. Finally, the commodified version of change compensates for the absence of meaningful change in society and history.

The current popularity of transforming toys may well reside in our utopian yearning for change that the toys themselves manage and control. Much of popular culture articulates the same contradictory relationship between the desire for change and its control.

Animation is a good example, as if by magic, the animated cartoon makes lines appear to move spontaneously and brings figures to life. This filmic illusion, however has nothing to do with magic but is, instead, produced by a highly rationalized work force and a deeply technologized production process. When Mickey Mouse wiggles his magic fingers and brings a broom to life in *The Sorcerers Apprentice*, he enacts an extended metaphor for the magic of animation. When his single broom multiplies and becomes a threatening horde of marching brooms that necessitates the intervention of the master Sorcerer to restore order, the scene articulates another extended metaphor. This time it depicts the need for control in the production process. Nowhere in our society are the contradictions of capitalism rendered so visible — yet presented as if they were so "normal" — as they are in popular culture.

The icons of twentieth century popular culture are all deeply infused with the desire for change. By comparison, the nineteenth century was populated by concrete folk heroes such as Paul Bunyan, Pecos Bill and John Henry, who may have grown very large, but who never metamorphosed into someone else. These heroes spoke for historical development and continuity and the centered, very solid construction of masculinity. This is certainly no longer the case with the advent of the twentieth century superheroes. Superman, Batman, the Incredible Hulk, Spiderman, Aquaman, and all the other "men" (as well as a few feminine adjuncts like Wonder Woman), are locked into the perpetual articulation of the moment of transformation. Clark Kent/Superman, Bruce Wayne/Batman, Peter Parker/Spiderman, and now Prince Adam/He-Man — all the super heroes demonstrate that transformation means that masculinity is constructed as a duality. The weak, sometimes bumbling, even nurturing aspects of masculinity are portrayed as somehow necessary to the emergence of the superhero so long as these can be kept separate from the superhero's omnipotent form.

Peter Parker gives a clue for interpreting all the super heroes as representations of change on the individual level. He is the perpetual articulation of the transformation from adolescence to adult manhood. No matter how many transformations he undergoes, Peter Parker never advances beyond high



school and the chem practice he inevitably swing through the city. Similarly, Superman as an adult man, but boyish ineptitude he, adolescence. Prince Adam the 1980's version of the hero complex. Boyish loving of parents, friend pet cat, Prince Adam's Palace of Eternia with obligations or woes. He respect Prince Adam's Resourceful, courageous battles the enemies of the burden of his world the case of his superhero almost no one knows the ner Prince Adam is. Hence, the transformation depicted and experienced of explosive power. Prince his sword, commands Castle Gray Skull, and "He-Man." Contrary information back to Prince



school and the chem test or basketball practice he inevitably misses in order to swing through the city as Spiderman. Similarly, Superman may be portrayed as an adult man, but for Clark Kent's boyish ineptitude he, too, suggests adolescence. Prince Adam/He-Man is the 1980's version of the same super hero complex. Boyish in his humour, loving of parents, friends, and his giant pet cat, Prince Adam sports about the Palace of Eternia with very few duties, obligations or woes. He-Man is in every respect Prince Adam's antithesis. Resourceful, courageous, dynamic, he battles the enemies of Eternia and bears the burden of his world's future. As in the case of his superhero predecessors, almost no one knows the mild mannered Prince Adam is really He-Man. Hence, the transformation to He-Man is depicted and experienced as a moment of explosive power. Prince Adam seizes his sword, commands the power of Castle Gray Skull, and KABOOOOOM!: "He-Man." Contrarywise, the transformation back to Prince Adam is por-

trayed as a moment of humiliation. Because he is never around during his people's crucial battles, Prince Adam is felt to be a "wimp".

It would be simplistic and reductive to interpret the Prince Adam/He-Man complex as an extended metaphor for the penis, even though the sword, the sudden empowerment and the return to relaxed wimpishness make the vulgar Freudian reading unavoidable. Similarly, it would be limiting and essentializing to interpret the dual construction of masculinity as two separate, perhaps age differentiated, but nevertheless, equal male gender possibilities. Such an analysis does no more than equate gender with a set of attributes and fails to question why at this point in history, masculinity appears to be conceived as a duality. And it fails to consider how gender and our thoughts about it are bound up with our conceptualization of change at the individual and historical levels.

The question, finally, is not which is a better manifestation of gender, but how we might begin to imagine an alternative process of gender formation and expression? Is it possible to bring forth a totalized expression of masculinity

that neither recreates the centered and solid nineteenth century folk hero or the twentieth century dualistic superhero?

When little boys buy Prince Adam to compliment their He-Man dolls, they are affirming the separate and dual construction of masculinity. But, even as they yearn for He-Man's muscles, they are also demonstrating an appreciation for all the boyish and nurturing traits Prince Adam embodies. Uncovering the utopian aspects of the young boy's fascination with Prince Adam begs a larger consideration: what about young girls? In a society dominated by mass culture and the commodity form is it possible to imagine a gendering process that boys and girls might experience reciprocally? Or are there only Barbies and He-Men - or worse yet: "boys and boys"?

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