
Gender Trouble in Arcadia or a World of Multigendered Possibility?

Intersubjectivity and Gender in *The Wind in the Willows*

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'Liberal' feminist readings: Misogynistic overtones in *The Wind in the Willows*

According to Peter Green, sex (and more particularly puberty/adolescence) is one of the 'great enemies' in Kenneth Grahame's world because it signals the end of childhood innocence, and 'breaks up the ideal pattern' (1982, p.117). Grahame himself claimed that by using anthropomorphized characters, instead of humans for *The Wind in the Willows*, he avoided 'weary sex problems' (cited in Green 1982, p.117). In a letter to his publishers at Charles Scribner's, Grahame's insistence that *The Wind in the Willows* was 'free of problems, clear of the clash of sex' (cited in Kuznets 1988, p.175) further suggests that he wanted to stay away from issues of sex and gender in his book. However, as various critics' (Kuznets 1988; Gaarden 1994) charges of misogyny indicate, Grahame does not manage to avoid issues of sex, and the text arguably contains misogynistic overtones. For example, both Rat and Mole make derogatory comments to Toad about women. Rat criticizes Toad for being 'flung into the water – by a woman too!' (Grahame 1983, p.172), and Mole suggests to Toad that being locked in his bedroom is preferable to spending time in hospital 'being ordered about by female nurses' (p.93). Moreover, in an exchange between Toad and the Bargewoman, 'girls' are referred to as 'little hussies', and 'idle trollops' (p.153). Thus, Grahame's claim to Teddy Roosevelt that the text contained 'no problems, no sex, no second meaning' (cited in Kuznets 1988, p.175), reveals that perhaps Grahame was frankly ignorant of the misogynistic overtones pervading his book or he wrote from the perspective of 'a male who finds women inconsequential' (Marshall 1994, p.62).

For some feminist critics, such as Lois Kuznets, Grahame's insistence that the text is free from the 'clash of sex', evades the fact that 'beneath its Arcadian surface lie deeply buried and complex concerns' (1988, p.175). Bonnie Gaarden has argued that:

the putative maleness of all the animal characters is nullified by their singularity and by the lack of female characters, and so the four main characters are, in effect, genderless or androgynous.

(Gaarden 1994, p.57)

If I understand Gaarden's position correctly, she is arguing that without the presence of the opposing category of 'female(ness)', the supposed 'maleness' of the main characters is cancelled out. The result is that Rat, Mole, Badger, and Toad are rendered 'genderless'. In a similar vein, Lois Kuznets had earlier argued that male characters' fulfilment of traditional 'female values' reflected an 'androgyny of nurturing males...that can postulate no similar androgyny for females' (1988, p.179). Kuznets contends that 'males rather than females dispense the hospitality, create the welcoming atmosphere, and share the oral delights of food and drink' (1988, p.176). For Kuznets, therefore, Grahame marginalised females in his book by appropriating their 'traditional nurturing functions' (1988, p.176) into his male characters.

While Kuznets' and Gaarden's readings offer a valuable entry point for critiquing the role of gender in *The Wind and the Willows*, in this paper I demonstrate an alternative approach using Jessica Benjamin's psychoanalytic feminist theory of intersubjectivity and gender development. First I outline Benjamin's 'postconventional' (1995, p.76) approach to gender, and then follow with an 'intersubjective' reading of *The Wind in the Willows* that unsettles 'fixed' notions of gender identity, replacing the 'discourse of identity' with the notion of 'plural identifications' (Benjamin 1995, p.75). Integral to this paper is Benjamin's idea that the subject can maintain plural identifications by managing an awareness of *both* 'sameness' *and* 'difference' in an intersubjective state of tension, and not as mutually exclusive oppositions conceptualised as 'either/or'.

Jessica Benjamin's 'overinclusive' approach to gender

According to Benjamin, there is a fundamental problem with adhering to a logic of gender which constructs masculinity and femininity as 'binary opposites', and thus negates the possibility of positions or identifications 'outside' (1995, p.76) or 'between' the binary frame. Instead, Benjamin suggests we understand gender constitution in terms of 'multiplicity and mutuality denied by the oedipal form' (1995, p.76). She argues that in contrast to Freud's model where difference is repudiated and identification merely functions as a confirmation of likeness, 'difference is only truly established when it exists in tension with likeness,



when we are able to recognize the other in ourselves' (Benjamin 1988, p.169; emphasis added). She insists that 'recognition' of the 'other' requires 'being able to perceive commonality through difference' (Benjamin 1988, p.171). For Benjamin, therefore, 'true differentiation sustains the balance between separateness and connection in a dynamic tension' (1988, p.171). Thus she suggests a 'dissolution of gender identity' (Benjamin 1988, p.176), by reworking the terms of sexual complementarity such as 'male-subject' and 'female-object' concurrently with avoiding any attempt to simply reverse these terms, and thus swap one unsatisfactory arrangement for another. In other words, she suggests assuming a 'paradoxical stance' (Benjamin 1995, p.7) by maintaining an intersubjective 'tension' between gender identifications.

Benjamin acknowledges that early feminist work opened up a necessary 'intellectual space' that uncovered the 'real social and psychological effects' of gender polarities on our world (1995, p.11). However, she insists that we must keep widening that space of gender inquiry to accommodate "multidimensionality" where we recognize that "'Woman" is not a unitary identity' (1995, p.11). In contrast to Kuznets and Gaarden's readings, for example, Benjamin's postconventional approach decenters 'fixed' gendered oppositions by integrating 'overinclusiveness' into complementary structures so that multiple gender positions become available. In this matrix, the 'essentialist' stance with its traditional association of females as the dispensers of hospitality, is deconstructed to unsettle the unreflexive binary opposition. Thus, instead of equating 'either' females 'or' males with 'hospitality', which allows for only one gendered opposition at a time, we can integrate the 'overinclusive' aspect into the binary opposition so that 'both' males 'and' females can be equated with hospitality. Consequently, from Benjamin's perspective, the male characters in *The Wind in the Willows* can quite comfortably carry out both 'traditional' masculine and feminine 'roles' without becoming genderless or androgynous. As in reality, sexual differences are 'far more multifarious than the binary logic of mutual exclusivity allows' (Benjamin 1995, p. 77), and individuals can exhibit characteristics and behaviours that do not always fit with 'traditional' notions of gender.

For Benjamin, Freud's oedipal model misconstrues gender identity as a 'final achievement, a cohesive, stable system, rather than an unattainable oedipal ideal' (Benjamin 1995, p.70). She understands oedipal identifications to be a heterosexually 'organized', and 'powerful set of fantasies' (Benjamin 1995, p.77) that do not allow for other identifications such as homosexual, bi-sexual and, trans-sexual. In her gender development theory, Benjamin suggests that the oedipal phase should no longer be viewed as the 'summation of development' (1989, p.177). Rather she views the oedipal phase as part of a series of developmental processes/achievements, and therefore only 'one step in mental life' (Benjamin 1989, p.177). Her approach suggests that in addition to focusing on the importance of the 'oedipal phase', equal attention should be given to 'pre' and 'post' oedipal phases of development. This would have the effect of creating a *more comprehensive* picture of gender development whereby coming to terms with difference is *truly* negotiated and integrated into the psyche. Benjamin thus proposes a developmental period called the 'preoedipal overinclusive phase' (1995, p.69) during which children identify with both parents' genders equally, and assimilate opposite-sex identifications. This phase is characterised by children becoming adept at recognising 'certain basic distinctions between masculinity and femininity' (Benjamin 1995, p.63). In the 'overinclusive' phase, children try through 'bodily mimesis' to imaginatively elaborate masculinity and femininity within themselves, both in terms of symbolizing 'genital meanings' and assimilating unconsciously the 'gestural and behavioural vocabulary' supplied by culture to express both gender options (Benjamin 1995, p. 63).

To elucidate her theory, Benjamin uses the example of the thirty-month old girl who may imitate her older brother's playing with action figures, and thereby assimilate masculinity symbolically - what she refers to as the 'phallic repertoire of colliding, penetrating, invading, and blocking' (1995, p.63). Alternatively, a twenty-four month old boy may 'insist he has a vagina', and then later at three years when he is more aware of external anatomy, might instead claim to be pregnant, and thus elaborate the fantasy of 'receiving, holding, and expelling' (Benjamin 1995, p.63). Although at this point in development, children

identify through imagination and fantasy ignorant to the impossibility of 'acquiring certain capacities and organs' (Benjamin 1995, p.103), through 'play' children create an intersubjective or transitional space which facilitates the 'symbolic bridging of difference' (1995, p.75). This symbolic play space permits the child to 'entertain wishes that reality denies' (Benjamin 1995, p. 75), allowing that which is *different* to become integrated into the developing psyche, where it can become *familiar* and possibly an aspect of self. Thus, Benjamin advocates giving 'greater' (1988, p.169) (although not exclusive) value to the preoedipal world, and an 'overinclusive' phase of role-playing, practicing and enjoying a more fluid experience of gender.

In Benjamin's developmental theory, it is only in the later 'oedipal phase' towards the end of the fourth year, that children relinquish their claim to 'be everything' (1995, p.127). In the oedipal phase, therefore, children develop an awareness of 'gender differentiation proper, when the complementary opposites are attributed to self and other, respectively' (Benjamin 1995, p.64). Benjamin insists, however, that the 'sexual freedom' (1995, p. 78) experienced by children in the earlier 'preoedipal' 'overinclusive' phase need not be relinquished in favour of the strict gender complementarity of the oedipal phase. Through relating intersubjectively (recognising the 'other' as having a separate, and yet equivalent centre of subjectivity), individuals can thus return to the 'overinclusive position' and 'access the flexible identificatory capacities of preoedipal life' (Benjamin 1995, p.75). Recasting Freud's dualistic oppositions of identification 'either/or', to an 'overinclusive' scenario of 'both/and', means that the 'overinclusive' position enables the subject to *straddle* the 'space between the opposites' (Benjamin 1995, p.50), to tolerate both 'sameness' and 'difference' in a state of manageable tension. At the same time, Benjamin's 'overinclusive' approach to gender preserves the 'experiential basis' of the binary categories moving 'theory more deeply into our subjective experience, clinical and otherwise' (1995, p.9).

Benjamin's 'overinclusive' position is inspired by theoretical developments from outside the psychoanalytic world such as deconstruction and post-structuralism

which 'seek to return to the primary reference points in order to renegotiate oppositional categories' (1995, p.9). However, while Benjamin admits to her affinity for the 'decentering stance of contemporary feminist theory in general' and the 'effort to deconstruct the notion of an essential female identity in particular' (1995, p.12), she continues to find the binary system of gender to be an important component of psychoanalytic thinking. While some feminist and/or queer theories such as Judith Butler's (1990) interrogate 'essentialist positions' and the notion of identity in particular (Benjamin 1995, p. 10), for Benjamin, binary oppositions such as man-woman 'play a major role' (1995, p.11) in organizing both our psychic and experiential understanding of the world. Benjamin's 'overinclusive' approach to gender complementarity ('both/and'), reworks the prevailing gender systems terms and binary logic by 'breaking down and recombining opposites rather than by discovering something wholly different, unrepresented or unrepresentable' (Benjamin 1995, p.76). Benjamin suggests that it is of more value to accept the paradoxes that can arise when we identify with more than one perspective than try to resolve those contradictions (Benjamin 1995, p.10). As I will discuss next, *The Wind in the Willows* can be read as exhibiting an 'overinclusive' approach to gender which 'contains rather than resolves contradictions' (Benjamin 1995, p.59) in the representation of gender in the text.

An intersubjective reading of the role of gender in *The Wind in the Willows*

Citing the origins of the text as a bedtime story for Grahame's partially blind son Alistair, Cynthia Marshall argues that *The Wind in the Willows*, 'offers an unusual and compelling example of a children's text that does not privilege the visual senses' (1994, p.59). Marshall contends that the characters are 'detached from any sustained representation' of their physical bodies and are therefore 'not animals in any firm mimetic sense' (1994, p.59). For Marshall, this distinct lack of physical representation in the narrative enables the characters to remain undifferentiated and therefore unrestricted by 'logical causation and spatial possibility' (1994, p.60). For this reason, readers are able to suspend their disbelief at a Toad driving a humanized motor car, for example. Marshall's argument has ramifications for the way we view the role of gender in

the text: if she is correct and the animals' 'move easily between radically discontinuous positions' (1994, p.60) then conceivably, they would also display the same level of fluidity of movement in relation to gender identifications. Toad's and Mole's cross-dressing in the washerwoman's clothes, therefore, clearly introduces 'what has otherwise been absent from the text: a visually realized and highly gendered body' (Marshall 1994, p.63). Significantly, for a text that has been criticised for exhibiting misogynistic overtones, I suggest that Grahame's inclusion of Toad's and Mole's gender-bending antics in his narrative actually unsettles 'fixed' notions of gender identity, and is more reflective of an 'ironic' distortion of gender conventions (Benjamin 1995, p.72).

Through the 'transitional space of communicative play' (Benjamin 1995, p.75), which includes all forms of theatrical performance including trans-gender impersonation, individuals are able to maintain a 'tension' between gender identifications, rather than breaking them down into 'split polarities' (Benjamin 1995, p.79). Therefore, dressed as the washerwoman, both Toad and Mole respectively, occupy the intersubjective/transitional space of what Benjamin terms the 'recognizing third' (Benjamin 2005, p.449). In this 'space of thirdness' (Benjamin 2005, p.449), Toad and Mole identify with the washerwoman (the 'other'), and to impersonate her successfully, they must (albeit momentarily) get inside her mind and let her inside their minds. They must make the washerwoman's experience of the world congruent with their own in order to fool other people that they are indeed she. It is important to stress here, however, that as a normal part of psychic life, individuals shift 'continually between complementary and recognizing positions' (Benjamin 2005, p. 450), and that although Toad and Mole briefly assume the washerwoman's persona, when their need for the disguise has passed, they quickly revert back to their old selves unchanged by the experience.

According to Benjamin, gendered self-representations are in reality constantly being 'destabilized by conflicting mandates and identifications' (1995 p.70) and in *The Wind in the Willows*, Toad's foray into trans-gender impersonation highlights the social structuring of identity. In the narrative, the washerwoman's clothes blur the lines

between 'identity' as a biologically determined role and as a social/economic construct. For example, when dressed as herself, the washerwoman's clothes define her as a working class woman. Conversely, Toad's clothes define him as part of the *nouveau-riche*. The contrast between her social status and Toad's is clear as the Gaoler's daughter states: 'you are very rich' and 'she is very poor' (Grahame 1983, p.118). However, despite his initial revulsion at the thought of parading around the countryside dressed as a washerwoman (p.120), Toad soon realises that for all his wealth, the washerwoman has something he does not have, namely - the freedom to come and go from the prison as she pleases.

Although aware of the benefits of his disguise in facilitating his escape from prison, Toad has also been warned by the Gaoler's daughter that he will have to endure 'chaff' from the male warders, and must maintain the pretence of being 'a widow woman' with a 'character to lose' (p.121). Thus, in order to sustain the illusion of an upper-class (male) Toad passing off as a working class (human) woman, Toad must do more than simply wear the washerwoman's clothes; he must mimic another recognised identity. In order to maintain his disguise, Toad 'suited his retorts to his company and to his supposed character', and successfully dodges the 'outspread arms of the last warder' who was 'pleading with simulated passion for just one last farewell embrace' (pp. 121-122). The consummate performer, Toad is:

soon agreeably surprised to find how easy everything was made for him, and a little humbled that both his popularity, and the sex that seemed to inspire it, were really another's.
(p. 121)

This passage demonstrates Benjamin's 'overinclusive' position in that Toad is momentarily able to sustain the paradoxical tension between his 'ideal self-representation and actual self-experience' (1995 p.70). For Benjamin, transitional space is opened up by the 'action of play and just pretend' (1995, p.95), and through pretending to be someone else, and by 'performing' another's identity, Toad is able to manage two identities (his own and the washerwoman's) in a state of tension. Furthermore, at the same time as he is assuming and assimilating the

identity of a 'different other' (Benjamin 1998, p.82), Toad momentarily shares the washerwoman's experience of the world. He becomes 'a little humbled' and clearly aware that the 'popularity' and recognition he is receiving is directed more at what he *represents* (the washerwoman) rather than who he *really is* underneath (a Toad). Here Toad's awareness of the distinct differences between his 'real' self and the 'identity' he is playing demonstrates how through the transitional space of play, the intersubjective self is able to 'tolerate and sustain' (Benjamin 1998, p.105) two contradictory or conflicting subject positions without losing a sense of self identity.

When Toad finally escapes from prison, he is further faced with the washerwoman's economic and social limitations, and experiences the extent to which his 'new' identity (and arguably his 'own') is constructed by social discourses. To his 'horror' he discovers that he had left his 'pocket-book, money, keys, watch...all that makes life worth living' (p.124) behind in his cell. Probably for the first time in his life, Toad is without money, and must beg and supplicate himself on to the mercy of others. Ironically, therefore, although Toad's disguise as the 'well-known' and 'popular character' of the washerwoman gives him the kind of freedom he needs to escape from prison undetected, he is also restricted by the social and economic hardships of the woman he is 'forced to represent' (p. 123).

Whereas Toad's performance in the dress is clearly bound up with the washerwoman's social and economic identity, Mole's use of the same dress to trick the stoats and weasels occupying Toad Hall, shows the further destabilisation of the portrayal of gender in the text. Although Toad undoubtedly suffers during his time as the washerwoman, Mole later uses the dress for a different purpose, one in which he is not constrained by the same need to mimic the real washerwoman's identity. Indeed, not only does Mole successfully pass himself off as a human female as indicated by the stoat sentries at Toad Hall identifying him as a washerwoman (p.187) and the sergeant in charge asking him to 'run away my good woman' (p.187), but he also has a great deal of fun doing it: 'I've been having such fun!' (p.187). Mole's more playful performance of cross-dressing in the washerwoman's clothes demonstrates Benjamin's idea that by sustaining the tension between contrasting

elements (such as a small animal dressed as a human female, or one individual impersonating another), plural identifications become 'potentially available' (Benjamin 1995, p.73) rather than inaccessible, and that interplay between multiple positions can be enjoyable.

When considering the question posed by this paper's title: 'Gender Trouble in Arcadia or a World of Multigendered Possibility?', I suggest that while *The Wind in the Willows* will always remain constrained by its own 'historical moorings' (Marshall 1994, p.67), using Benjamin's 'overinclusive' approach, the narrative can be read as sustaining an intersubjective tension *between* binary positions revealing gender experience as 'both tenacious and fragile' (Benjamin 1995, p.70). Thinking of gender in 'intersubjective terms' means leaving a world of 'fixed boundaries with un-crossable borders' for a 'transitional territory in which conventional opposites create movable walls and pleasurable tension' (Benjamin 1995 p.70). Therefore, assuming a 'paradoxical stance' (Benjamin 1995, p.7) towards gender means acknowledging that that even though *The Wind in the Willows* can certainly be read as a homosocial narrative (Kuznets 1988, Gaarden, 1994), it can also be viewed as undermining its own apparent misogyny with a playful, theatrical approach to gender construction. Furthermore, Benjamin's perspective reveals that far from being 'fixed' or immutable, one's 'ideal self-representation' is constantly being modified by conflicting identifications every day of our lives. Consequently, our 'actual self-experience' is perhaps more multifarious than reified notions of gender dichotomies would seem to permit. As a theoretical position, the *in-between* space of Benjamin's 'recognizing third' (2005, p.449) overcomes the limitations of the dualistic binary frame within which contemporary feminist theory operates (Benjamin 1995, p.76), and I would argue, helps to push the boundaries of psychoanalytic feminist inquiry beyond 'fixed' notions of gender identity.



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