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# The Nursery Hermaphrodite: Gender Bending in Laura Richards's 'My Japanese Fan'

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## Abstract

Laura Richards (1850-1943) was a prolific and popular American children's writer at the end of the nineteenth century. Her celebrity status, both as the daughter of Julia Ward Howe and as a maternal authority on children's literature, ensured the smooth and uncritical reception of her children's poems, which seemed appropriately in line with the Victorian view of childhood. However, a more nuanced reading suggests that Richards carefully utilized the relatively safe medium of children's literature to challenge conservative views and express unconventional adult concerns. The paper explores subversive features in Richards's children's poems in the context of the nineteenth-century American nursery. Particular attention will be given to Richards's "My Japanese Fan" (1899), which deals with the taboo theme of gender-bending. I will argue that this extraordinary poem is Richards's personal response to her mother's "Laurence manuscript," a secret novella whose protagonist is a hermaphrodite, which was written by JW Howe in the winter of 1846-47. Familiar with her mother's struggles as a female poet with (what were in her days considered) masculine intellect and aspirations, Richards could easily identify with the metaphor of the hermaphrodite. Read this way, Richards's beguiling and subversive poem complicates traditional views of women and children in Victorian America. Together with the vast body of her poetry, the poem demonstrates the infinite subversive potential of children's literature as written by women who have safely yet wisely used it to express their feminist concerns.

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