

Research Article

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Naughty Girl, or Not a Girl? Behavior and Becoming in *Les Malheurs de Sophie*

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Abstract: This study presents a critical analysis of the classic nineteenth-century French children's novel *Les Malheurs de Sophie*, written by the Comtesse de Ségur. The story follows the misadventures of a mischievous little girl in order to highlight the consequences of her naughty behavior and provide a counter-example for Ségur's young female readers. In this article, Mangerson draws upon scholarship in both queer theory and early childhood psychology to demonstrate that Sophie's inappropriate behavior can be interpreted by the modern reader as evidence of gender fluidity. Mangerson examines Sophie's misuse of gender-specific toys, her curiosity to explore forbidden spaces, and her failure to conform to her peers. This study argues that this "naughty girl" is perhaps "not a girl," and that her behavior is indicative of the process of gender identity formation, which is strongly influenced by socio-historical constructs of femininity.

Keywords: gender, fluidity, children's, literature, Ségur

"We regularly punish those who fail to do their gender right."

–Judith Butler, *Gender Troubles* (190)

Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls: 100 Tales of Extraordinary Women (2016) is a New York Times bestselling children's book that highlights the accomplishments of women and girls throughout history. This illustrated collection of one-page biographies celebrates women who have overcome obstacles to succeed in male-dominated fields such as sports, science, politics, and entrepreneurship. Among the 100 "rebel girls" featured in this volume, the reader will find familiar names such as Amelia Earhart, Queen Elizabeth I, Malala Yousafzai, Marie Curie, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, and Serena Williams. There is also the unexpected story of Coy Mathis, a first-grader who was born male and transitioned to being a girl with the support of her parents. Authors Elena Favilli and Francesca Cavallo write in their preface that they hope these stories will inspire young girls to be curious and passionate, in the spirit of building "a world where gender will not define how big you can dream, how far you can go" (xii). The women in this book are celebrated for their gender-nonconforming behavior, in order to show today's young girls the endless possibilities of who and what they can become, even if that simply means becoming a girl.

While *Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls* may be a recent sensation in children's literature, the idea of telling stories to girls – about other girls – in order to influence their behavior is hardly a new one. In 1859, Comtesse de Ségur (née Sophie Rostopchine, 1799–1874) published *Les Malheurs de Sophie*, which became an enduring classic among French children's books, and marked the beginning of a rich literary oeuvre for the author.¹ Ségur's story of the mischievous young Sophie de Réan has withstood the test of time and has

¹ This prolific Franco-Russian author began composing fiction late in her life by writing down original fairy tales she had told to her own children and grandchildren. She published over a dozen children's books between 1856 and her death in 1874. Comtesse de Ségur is best known for her instructional novels for young children, which juxtapose appropriate and

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inspired multiple reprints, new illustrations, and several cinematic adaptations (the most recent of which was a full-length comedy released by Gaumont in 2016). Claire-Lise Malarte-Feldman observes that Ségur's works still resonate with modern French children:

In view of the unfailing success of Ségur's works with today's young readers, it is clear that children still find in her books a useful message that has outlived the nineteenth-century context. Indeed, it would be hard to imagine even today a young reader in France – and yet nowhere else – who, at one time or another, had not had in hand *Les Malheurs de Sophie* or *Un Bon petit diable*. (35)

Although *Les Malheurs de Sophie* does not carry such an explicitly pedagogical title as *Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls*, recent scholarly reflections on Ségur's work indicate that this text was designed to be read aloud by a parent to a child, in the tradition of the bedtime story (Porter 44). For example, Anne E. Berger recalls receiving Ségur's novels as a gift from her mother, and then reading them with her own daughter in turn (97). Furthermore, Jane Sunderland's 2011 cultural study of children's reading preferences indicates that whereas girls will happily read stories in which the main character is a boy (such as Harry Potter, Percy Jackson, or Tintin), boy readers are less willing to read stories that follow the adventures of a girl (14–15). If this is not evidence enough that *Les Malheurs de Sophie* is intended for a young female public, the author herself dedicates the novel to her granddaughter Élisabeth Frésneau and presents Sophie's story as true: "Voici des histoires vraies d'une petite fille que grand'mère a beaucoup connue dans son enfance" (*These are the true stories of a little girl whom Grandmother used to know very well when she was young*). Yet whereas *Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls* recounts stories of "misbehaving" women in hopes of broadening horizons for twenty-first-century girls, *Les Malheurs de Sophie* points its readers toward a specific standard for female behavior that reflects the gender norms of the Second Empire. In the preface, the wise grandmother characterizes Sophie as having many *défauts* and presents her as a counter-example for her grandchildren NOT to follow. Furthermore, Ségur implies that Sophie undergoes a kind of metamorphosis during her childhood – a transition, as it were – in order to overcome her character flaws. This change is emphasized by the repeated use in the past tense of the French verb *devenir*, to become:

Elle [Sophie] était colère, elle est devenue douce; elle était gourmande, elle est devenue sobre; elle était menteuse, elle est devenue sincère; elle était voleuse, elle est devenue honnête; enfin, elle était méchante, elle est devenue bonne. Grand'mère a tâché de faire de même. Faites comme elle, mes chers petits-enfants; cela vous sera facile, à vous qui n'avez pas tous les défauts de Sophie. (Ségur 7)

Now, this little girl used to get angry, but then she became sweet-tempered; she used to be greedy, but then she became restrained; she used to tell fibs, but then she became truthful; she used to steal, but then she became honest. And last of all, she used to be naughty, but then she became good. Grandmother, too, tried to do the same. Dear children, try to be like her. You should find it easy – you who do not suffer from Sophie's many faults. (Smee 7)

One could dismiss this description of a "naughty" little girl as a cultural product of another time, except that *Les Malheurs* remains a bestseller almost two centuries later. The twenty-first-century reader inevitably recognizes that the expectations for feminine behavior have changed since 1859, but the book's nostalgic charm and easy-to-read dialogues keep it on the shelves. Such enduring popularity implies that some aspects of Sophie's "becoming" are still met with a certain degree of approval by young girls, as well as by the adults who choose their reading material.

The preface of *Les Malheurs de Sophie* bears a resemblance to the words of twentieth-century feminist philosopher Simone de Beauvoir (1908–1986), who famously writes in *Le deuxième sexe* (1949) that one is not born a woman, but rather becomes one: "On ne naît pas femme; on le devient." Judith Butler elaborates on Beauvoir's statement in *Gender Troubles* (1990), arguing that this process of "becoming" a woman is never complete because social and cultural constructions of gender necessitate a constant evolution:

inappropriate behaviors and highlight their consequences. *Les Malheurs de Sophie* is the first of such novels and is also the first book in the Fleurville trilogy, which includes *Les Petites Filles modèles* and *Les Vacances*.

If there is something right in Beauvoir's claim that one is not born, but rather *becomes* a woman, it follows that *woman* itself is a term in process, a becoming, a constructing that cannot rightfully be said to originate or to end. As an ongoing discursive practice, it is open to intervention and resignification. Even when gender seems to congeal into the most reified forms, the 'congealing' is itself an insistent and insidious practice, sustained and regulated by various social means. It is, for Beauvoir, never finally possible to become a woman, as if there were a telos that governs the process of acculturation and construction. (45)

If becoming a woman requires an ongoing process to conform to a socially constructed model of gender, then becoming a girl deserves a place in this process. *Et si on ne naissait pas fille non plus, mais on le devenait?* This is the essential question this study seeks to answer – What if Ségur's Sophie de Réan, rather than being angry, greedy, dishonest, thieving, and mean, was simply struggling to become a girl as defined by her society and culture? Would her behavior still be considered as naughty, and would her character still be considered as flawed? Could her misadventures be interpreted as part of the arduous process of congealing her gender identity? The present analysis proposes a critical re-reading of *Les Malheurs de Sophie* in light of recent developments in gender studies, particularly among children. We consider Sophie not as a little girl, but as a gender-fluid child whose femininity has not yet been established. Butler contends in *Gender Troubles* that binary gender identity is not naturally fixed, but is internalized through a repeated series of performative acts: "Gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*" (191). Citing Gayle Rubin, Butler suggests that the pre-Oedipal child is non-binary: "Before the transition of a biological male or female into a gendered man or woman, 'each child contains all of the sexual possibilities available to human expression'" (100).

This idea of gender fluidity among children has since become a subject of study among developmental psychologists such as Diane Ehrensaft, whose research demonstrates that young children may take years or even decades to affirm a binary gendered self:

Many children will go through a fluid process that extends well beyond their fifth or sixth year. Some children will know by age three that their affirmed gender is not the one in their birth certificate. Others will live for several years as the gender assigned to them at birth, only to discover later that they really don't identify with that gender and are much more the other. Some children may be so fluid that they will experiment for a while with one gender and then another, signifying not that they are gender chaotic or confused but that they are trying out different gender expressions or identities for size. The key premise is that gender identity formation does not end at a point in time but is a fluid process that might extend over the course of a boy or girl's childhood or even into adulthood. (37)

Gender identity has been proven to be an important aspect of child development, a process which is influenced by both internal (biological) and external (societal) factors. Children's literature plays an important role in this process. Socio-historical constructs of gender have trickled from real life into bedtime stories for centuries, and gender has been policed both in and through fictional characters. Literary scholar Megan Friddle remarks that children's literature serves a disciplinary function, and that adults write stories about children in order to calm their own insecurities about gender nonconformity – the text acts as "a mirror to adult fears about child and adolescent 'deviance' and desires" (117). Professor of Education Elizabeth Marshall concurs that literature plays a role in the definition of girlhood and steers vulnerable young readers toward normative heterosexuality:

Children's literature is tied to the practices of childrearing and schooling and arises as a complex site from which to examine the discursive construction of the girl. Literature for children has a particular history invested in disciplining young readers into normative heterosexual femininity and masculinity. (261)

Les Malheurs de Sophie is no exception to this cultural phenomenon – in the same way that Comtesse de Ségur disciplines the unruly Sophie de Réan toward a paradigm of idealized feminine conduct, the reader notices that this metamorphosis is valorized and rewarded.

The present study examines three of the deviant behaviors for which Sophie is repeatedly punished in *Les Malheurs* – inappropriate play, exploration beyond the domestic sphere, and failure to resemble her peers. The episodes that address such transgressions are analyzed through the critical lenses of modern-

day scholarship in both children's literature and early childhood psychology.² The first section, "Ugly Dolls and Dog-water Tea," discusses how Sophie's misuse of gender-specific toys can be read as evidence of gender creativity. The second section, "Testing the [Binary] Boundaries," demonstrates how Sophie's experiences with sneaking into forbidden places discourage her from venturing beyond the domestic sphere. The final section, "The [Gender] Trouble with Paul," shows how the adult perception of Sophie's behavior is problematized by the "good" behavior of her playmates.

Ugly Dolls and Dog-Water Tea

Sophie's misadventures begin rather famously with the accidental mutilation of a doll. At the beginning of Chapter 1, "La Poupée de cire," almost-4-year-old Sophie de Réan is delighted to receive a beautiful wax doll from her father in Paris. She can hardly wait for her maid to remove its packaging so that she can hold and admire it. The doll is truly perfect, with blue eyes and rosy cheeks:

Sophie put prendre la plus jolie poupée qu'elle eût jamais vue. Les joues étaient roses avec de petites fossettes; les yeux bleus et brillants; le cou, la poitrine, les bras en cire, charmants et potelés ... Sophie l'embrassa plus de vingt fois, et, la tenant dans ses bras, elle se mit à sauter et à danser. (Ségur 10)

Soon Sophie was holding up the prettiest doll she had ever laid eyes on. Her cheeks were pink and dimpled. Her eyes were a sparkling blue. And her neck, shoulders and arms, which were all made out of wax, were sweetly rounded ... Sophie smothered her doll with kisses and then, holding her in her arms, she started to leap and dance around. (Smee 10–11)

The doll's charming beauty, however, will be short-lived under Sophie's clumsy care. She lays it out in the sun to warm it, and the doll's eyes promptly melt into its head. She gives her doll a bath, and scrubs off all the color from her rosy cheeks and lips. Sophie tries to curl her doll's hair and burns it off. She wants to teach her doll to do tricks, "lui apprendre à faire des tours de force" (16), so she hangs her from a string and breaks off her arm. She tries to soak her doll's feet in a hot bath and melts them off. The *coup mortel* comes when Sophie decides to show her doll how to climb a tree. The pale, bald, deformed doll falls to the rocky ground and her head shatters into a hundred pieces: "Sa tête frappa contre des pierres et se cassa en cent morceaux" (17). The following chapter, "L'enterrement," recounts the joyous occasion of the doll's burial, in which Sophie, her cousin Paul, and her friends Camille and Madeleine playfully conduct a closed-casket funeral ceremony to lay the poor doll to her final rest.

The destruction of the doll has been analyzed by Ségurians scholars more than any other episode in *Les Malheurs de Sophie*. For example, Valérie Lastinger argues that the beautiful doll, presented as a gift from Sophie's absent father, symbolizes the patriarchal order and the future role that Sophie will be expected to play as a wife, mother, and object of male desire: "Traditionally, the father-figure gives his daughter an image of femininity in order to subdue her into her patriarchal role, mainly that of a beautiful object" (24). According to Lastinger, Sophie's dismembering of the doll constitutes an act of female rebellion, because she systematically eliminates the doll's perfect feminine attributes. Anne E. Berger proposes a Freudian reading of the doll episode, in which Sophie's unconscious mutilation of her doll is an act of self-destruction meant to separate Sophie from her mother: "The violence of the doll's handling, as extreme as it is unconscious, may represent the violence exercised by the mother in the name of the pedagogical imperative, at least as Sophie experiences it" (116). This study expands upon the aforementioned arguments by incorporating child psychology in order to interpret Sophie's [mis]use of "girl" toys as evidence of gender-creative play.

² The comparison of the fictional writings of Comtesse de Ségur with clinical studies in child development can be justified by an examination of Ségur's first published work, because the mother of eight was a pioneer in this field. In 1855, prior to turning her literary talents to fiction, Ségur published a manual on children's health, *La Santé des enfants*.

In the introduction to her book *Gender Born, Gender Made: Raising Healthy Gender-Nonconforming Children*, Diane Ehrensaft presents the term “gender creativity” as the means by which gender-fluid children fill the space between their assigned (birth) gender and their true gender identity that has not yet solidified:

A developmental position in which the child transcends the culture’s normative definitions of male/female to creatively interweave a sense of gender that comes neither totally from the inside (the body, the psyche), nor totally from the outside (the culture, others’ perceptions of the child’s gender), but resides somewhere in between. (5)

Sophie exhibits gender creativity in the way that she plays with her doll. It is important to notice that she does not reject the gender-specific toy, on the contrary, she is elated by her father’s gift. Moreover, she does not hurt her doll on purpose – the doll’s injuries are a result of Sophie’s trying to mother her, and she has not yet acquired the maternal tenderness that comes so naturally to many “good” little girls. Furthermore, in addition to bathing her doll and trying to make her more beautiful by curling her hair, Sophie also plays with her doll in what could be considered boyish ways. Richard A. Lippa observes in *Gender, Nature, and Nurture* that from a very early age, girls tend to engage in more domestic play, whereas boys tend to prefer more physical, rough-and-tumble play (43). In the spirit of educating her doll, Sophie hangs her by a string and teaches her to climb a tree. The way in which Sophie interacts with her doll demonstrates that she has not yet mastered feminine behavior, and also that she is willing to play with a gender-specific toy in very gender-nonconforming ways. She eventually destroys her doll by playing creatively with her, not by seeking to harm her.

This gender creativity can also be seen in subsequent episodes such as Chapter 12, “Le thé.” When Sophie receives a beautiful tea set for her fourth birthday, she cannot wait to serve tea to Camille, Madeleine, and Paul later that afternoon. But her mother tells her she must only pretend to serve tea because she fears Sophie will hurt herself and make a mess:

Non, lui dit Mme de Réan, vous répandriez la crème partout, vous vous brûleriez avec le thé. Faites semblant d’en prendre, ce sera tout aussi amusant. (Séгур 76)

“No,” answered Madame de Réan, “You’ll just spill cream everywhere and you’ll burn yourself on the tea. Why don’t you just pretend? That’s just as much fun.” (Smee 83)

Sophie is not content to play pretend – the gender-specific toy in itself is not sufficient to satisfy her. Once again, she takes a creative approach to making a real tea party: she mixes water from the dog’s bowl with clover leaves for “tea,” and with silver polish to make “cream.” Sophie is very satisfied with her solution, and she cannot wait to host her friends – it never occurs to her that dog water and silver polish might not make a perfectly appropriate tea:

Sophie attendit ses amies encore une demi-heure, mais elle ne s’ennuya pas; elle était si contente de son thé, qu’elle ne voulait pas s’en éloigner; elle se promenait autour de la table, le regardant d’un air joyeux, se frottait les mains et répétait: Dieu! Que j’ai de l’esprit! Que j’ai de l’esprit! (Séгур 80)

Sophie waited for her friends for another half an hour, but she did not get bored. She was so happy with her tea set that she didn’t want to be far from it. She wandered around the table, admiring it happily and rubbing her hands in glee as she said “Goodness, how clever I am!” over and over again. (Smee 85–86)

It is only when her friends react negatively to her concoction that she realizes she may have made a mistake. Sophie and Paul end up in a fistfight on the floor while Camille and Madeleine watch, horrified. The mothers intervene and Sophie is punished for her disobedience and for having fought with Paul:

Voilà un joli régal pour vos amies! De l’eau sale, de la craie! Vous commencez bien vos quatre ans, mademoiselle: en désobéissant quand je vous avais défendu de faire du thé, en voulant faire avaler à vos amies un soi-disant thé dégoûtant, et en vous battant avec votre cousin. Je reprends votre ménage, pour vous empêcher de recommencer, et je vous aurais envoyée dîner dans votre chambre, si je ne craignais de gâter le plaisir de vos petites amies, qui sont si bonnes qu’elles souffriraient de votre punition. (Séгур 84–85)

Well, what a lovely surprise for your friends! Dirty water mixed with chalk! Your fifth year is certainly off to a good start ... disobeying me when I told you not to make any tea, then making your friends drink this awful, so-called 'tea' and, finally, fighting with your cousin! I'm taking your tea set away so you can't do any more harm, and I would send you to your room to have your dinner there if I didn't think it would spoil your friends' fun. After all, why should they be punished for your disobedience when they've been so good? (Smee 91)

Mme de Réan takes away her new tea set and makes a point to differentiate between Sophie's naughty behavior and the good behavior of Camille and Madeleine (which she claims is the only reason Sophie does not get sent to bed alone on her birthday). This is Sophie's mother's typical way of punishing her daughter for inappropriate play – she takes the abused plaything away, and she isolates Sophie from the rest of the household. The only exception to this punishment, ironically, is the doll. In the first chapter of *Les Malheurs*, when Sophie initially leaves her doll in the sun, Mme de Réan performs surgery on her: she asks the children to strip the doll while she gets her sewing kit, cuts the doll's head off to find the eyes, and sews her head back on properly as the children watch in awe. The doll, restored to its original beauty, is then returned to Sophie. But after this initial transgression, Sophie's gender-creative play usually results in the removal of the toy and the temporary exile of the offending child from the rest of the family. Her mother's reaction, though it may seem severe, is not atypical of parental attitudes toward their children's gender-bending behavior. Numerous studies show that parents often feel distressed or even disgusted by children whose tastes and behaviors challenge the norms of their assigned gender (Ehrensaft 21, 64; Lippa 163; Yelland 3; Perry et al. 290). Children become aware of this parental resentment and demonstrate destructive or aggressive behaviors in response to (or in anticipation of) punishment. An example of such behavior in *Les Malheurs* occurs in Chapter 18, “La boîte à ouvrage.” Mme de Réan receives a beautiful ornate sewing kit as a gift from Sophie's father. Sophie covets it and begs to have it, but her mother says she does not yet sew well enough to have such a luxurious kit, and she does not take good enough care of her things. One day while her mother is not looking, Sophie steals everything from the inside of the box and hides it in a drawer in her playroom. When Mme de Réan discovers her daughter's theft, she whips her soundly and reveals that the sewing kit was actually intended for Sophie, but only as a reward for 8 days of good behavior: “Que ce soit la récompense de huit jours de sagesse” (Ségur 136). Now, Sophie will never have the box, and her mother ultimately gives it away to a neighbor girl, Élisabeth Chéneau, who sews beautifully.³

Laurence Porter observes that “*Les Malheurs de Sophie* actively discourages the use of Sophie's imagination. Through a parodic reporting of her reasoning processes, we are constantly shown that her mind doesn't work properly” (47). In the case of Sophie's gender-creative play, we find that as she is repeatedly shamed and punished for her imaginative use of toys, her creativity morphs into frustration. When she does not play with her toys as she is instructed, they are taken away from her. Sophie eventually learns to anticipate this reaction from her mother and resorts to theft because she knows she will not be trusted with the sewing kit. Rather than evidence of a mind that is “not working properly,” these behaviors are indicative of the social learning process of operant conditioning (Lippa 105) as Sophie acquires gendered behaviors through a series of rewards and punishments.

Testing the [Binary] Boundaries

In addition to mishandling her toys, another of Sophie's primary *défauts* is wandering: she likes to explore places she has been explicitly forbidden to visit. The narrator of *Les Malheurs* explains Sophie's tendency to stray as a developmental delay that should have been corrected by this point in her life and identifies it as a cause of many of her misfortunes:

³ The name of the “good girl” Élisabeth Chéneau is similar to the name of Comtesse de Ségur's granddaughter from the preface, Élisabeth Frésneau.

Elle aurait dû être corrigée, mais elle ne l'était pas encore: aussi lui arriva-t-il bien d'autre malheurs. (Séguir 86)

She should have corrected her behavior, but she hadn't yet managed to do so. And that is how various misfortunes befell her. (Smee 93)

However, Sophie's trespassing can also be read as a curiosity to explore the "other" (masculine, non-binary) space to which she is denied access. Sophie is confined to the domestic sphere of the château, which is controlled by her mother and female maidservants. Laurence Porter notes that Sophie's space to make mistakes without consequences is limited: "Sophie has little privacy, because Séguir constructs her world so that the child's transgressions always leave broad traces" (50). Every time Sophie tests the boundary of her gendered female space, she is either hurt, threatened, or coerced back onto the "correct" gender path. Three such instances occur in Chapter 3 "La Chaux," Chapter 13 "Les Loups," and Chapter 16 "Les fruits confits."

In "La Chaux," Sophie is intrigued by a group of masons working on the courtyard of the family château. Despite her request for a closer look, her mother does not allow her to go into the courtyard by herself, claiming that she will get hurt because she is only a little girl and does not recognize the dangers:

Tu crois cela, parce que tu es une petite fille; mais, moi qui suis grande, je sais que la chaux brûle ... Voyons, ne raisonne pas tant et tais-toi. Je sais mieux que toi ce qui peut te faire mal ou non. Je ne veux pas que tu ailles dans la cour sans moi. (Séguir 21)

That's what you think because you are little. But because I am a grown-up, I know that lime can burn you ... Let's just leave it, shall we? I know best what may or may not hurt you. I don't want you going into the courtyard without me. (Smee 22)

Undeterred, Sophie waits until her mother is occupied with the gardener and sneaks into the courtyard alone to watch the workers. She is having a grand time until she steps into a basin of whitewash and has to be rescued by one of the masons. Her maid strips off her shoes and stockings just in time, before her legs are burned by the harsh chemicals. The maid's apron is ruined along with Sophie's clothes, and Mme de Réan makes Sophie use her pocket money to replace it.

"Les Loups" recounts an episode that is reminiscent of Charles Perrault's *Little Red Riding Hood*. Mme de Réan decides that Sophie is finally old enough to accompany her on a walk through the forest, as long as Sophie promises to keep up and stay right behind her mother on the path:

Tu vas venir avec moi; seulement fais attention à ne pas te mettre en arrière; tu sais que je marche vite, et, si tu t'arrêtais, tu pourrais rester bien loin derrière avant que je pusse m'en apercevoir. (Séguir 86)

You may come with me. But be careful not to fall too far behind. You know I like to walk quickly, and if you loiter, it might be some time before I notice you have been left behind. (Smee 94)

At first, Sophie and Paul manage to stay right behind Mme de Réan and her dogs, but Sophie is soon tempted by some delicious strawberries she sees growing along the edge of the path. She dismisses Paul's warnings not to stop, and she ventures into the forest by herself to eat the berries. Mme de Réan, far ahead of the children, does not realize Sophie is missing until the dogs become uneasy. She and Paul run back to discover an enormous wolf who is about to devour the unsuspecting Sophie. The dogs fight the wolf just as it grabs Sophie's petticoat, and they are all able to get away safely. When they arrive at home, Mme de Réan praises Paul and the dogs for their bravery and obedience, and shames Sophie for her gluttony and disobedience:

Mme de Réan raconta leur terrible aventure; chacun loua beaucoup Paul de son obéissance et de son courage, chacun blâma Sophie de sa désobéissance et de sa gourmandise, et chacun admira la vaillance des chiens, qui furent caressés et qui eurent un excellent dîner d'os et de restes de viande. (Séguir 92)

Madame de Réan recounted their terrifying adventure and everyone showered Paul with praise for his courage and his obedience, just as everyone chastised Sophie for her disobedience and her greediness. Then everyone patted the dogs, admiring their bravery, and they were treated to an excellent meal of bones and scraps. (Smee 99)

Sophie does not receive additional punishment for her mistake, since her mother decides that the fear of almost being eaten was punishment enough.

What is interesting to note about “La Chaux” and “Les Loups” is that when Sophie strays outside of the gender-appropriate space designated by her mother, she suffers a traumatic experience that forces her back into a recognition of the limits of her girlhood. She gets herself into danger and has to be rescued by a man, be it a worker or Paul. She goes from being an adventurer to being an unwitting damsel in distress. Furthermore, there is a fairy-tale-esque allusion to rape in both episodes. Sophie’s stockings must be forcibly removed because of the whitewash, and the wolf tries to drag her away by her underskirt and tears it. Sophie’s gender boundaries are being gradually constructed by fear, accompanied by the forced acceptance of her sexed body.

Through these deadly repercussions of her transgression of the gender border, Sophie becomes conditioned to repress her curiosity, a repression which eventually manifests itself in her unconscious mind. In Chapter 16, “Les Fruits confits,” Sophie sneaks into her mother’s bedroom (another off-limits space) to steal candied fruits. That night, she has a vivid dream in which she must choose between an easy path that leads to a “garden of evil” or a rocky path that leads to a “garden of delights.” Her mother interprets this dream as a sign from God that Sophie is finally learning to be good, and that God is showing her that the path to heaven may be difficult at first, but it becomes easier and more pleasant the longer one walks within it:

C’est que le bon Dieu, qui voit que tu n’es pas sage, te prévient par le moyen de ce rêve que, si tu continues à faire tout ce qui est mal et qui te semble agréable, tu auras des chagrins au lieu d’avoir des plaisirs. Ce jardin trompeur, c’est l’enfer; le jardin du bien, c’est le paradis; on y arrive par un chemin raboteux, c’est-à-dire en se privant de choses agréables, mais qui sont défendues; le chemin devient plus doux à mesure qu’on marche, c’est-à-dire qu’à force d’être obéissant, doux, bon, on s’y habitue tellement que cela ne coûte plus d’obéir et d’être bon, et qu’on ne souffre plus de ne pas se laisser aller à toutes ses volontés. (Séguir 116)

That dream is warning you that if you keep being naughty, even though it seems like fun at the time, you will end up very unhappy instead of enjoying yourself. The path leading you to a garden full of good things may be rocky, but that just means you can’t always have all the lovely things you wish for and which may have been forbidden. But the farther you go along that path, the more pleasant it will become. So the more you try to be obedient, sweet-tempered, and well-behaved, the easier it becomes and it will stop being so difficult to do as you are told and be a good girl. (Smee 127)

Whether Sophie plays in the courtyard, in the forest, or in her own dreams, there is no safe space to experiment. Staying in the correct gender path becomes a survival strategy, because straying has clearly punitive consequences (Butler 190). Moreover, no space exists to play *between* the paths – Sophie must choose. By testing the boundaries of space, she learns that the binary female route is the only way accessible to her, and that eventually she must accept (and maybe even start to enjoy) that this is the only place she belongs.

The [Gender] Trouble with Paul

Throughout *Les Malheurs de Sophie*, the naughtiness of Sophie’s behavior is highlighted by the better behavior of three other children around her. First, there are the *Petites filles modèles*, Camille and Madeleine de Fleurville. These two perfect sisters never step a toe out of line, and they represent the gold standard of aristocratic girlhood that Sophie can never manage to attain. Although they will play a more important role in Sophie’s later adventures, Camille and Madeleine only make a few cameo appearances in *Les Malheurs*. Sophie’s faithful companion is her 5-year-old cousin Paul. Paul is portrayed as the angel on Sophie’s shoulder, “a model of devotion and self-sacrifice” (Porter 49), and as the voice of reason who tries to talk her out of all her *sottises*. More importantly, Paul’s constant presence is a crucial factor in shaping Sophie’s gender identity. As a boy, Paul is an atypical playmate for a child of Sophie’s age. Furthermore, Paul is possibly as gender-fluid as Sophie, but he is not subject to the same degree of gender

policing, and therefore his gender-creative behaviors either go unnoticed or are interpreted as appropriate by the adults in his life.

Rita Chen observes in her ethnographic study of social practices among young children that an important step in the formation of gender identity is the shift toward same-sex play: “It is a common phenomenon during childhood construction of gender identity for children to gravitate to the same sex group – boys play with boys and girls play with girls” (158). This observation is confirmed by other studies in early childhood development – for example, both Lippa and Perry, Pauletti, and Cooper report that children begin to segregate into same-sex friend groups during the early preschool years: “By age 3 years, between-gender forms of gender identity are likely to have spurred most children to interact primarily with same-gender peers and to value fitting in with them” (Perry et al. 293). Lippa also argues in *Gender, Nature, and Nurture* that this sex segregation of playmates is “probably the most dramatic and consequential of all sex differences observed in children” (44). Young children begin to interact increasingly with members of their own sex and continue to do so until adolescence. Children learn how to act like boys or girls by observing and imitating the members of their same-sex social groups.

At this critical age for gender identity development, Sophie de Réan has limited opportunities to build strong same-sex friendships. Camille and Madeleine are invited over for special occasions, but Sophie does not interact with them on a day-to-day basis, and when they do come over, their visits are always accompanied by a reference to their superior behavior. This distinction is evident from the very first chapter, in which Sophie hesitates to let Paul hold her new doll because she fears he will break it, but she trusts Camille and Madeleine (who are not even present) to be gentle with her:

Je vais demander à maman d’inviter Camille et Madeleine à déjeuner avec nous, pour leur faire voir ma jolie poupée ... elles sont trop bonnes pour me faire de la peine en cassant ma pauvre poupée. (Séгур 12)

I’m going to ask Mama to invite Camille and Madeleine over to lunch so they can see my pretty dolly ... they’re such good girls, they would never upset me by breaking my poor doll. (Smee 12)

Although Sophie considers the Fleurville sisters to be her friends, she immediately situates them in a different category from she and Paul because they are “too good.” Because she does not have the regular peer pressure of other children who are affirmed girls, it is taking her longer to adopt girlish behavior. And when she is around other little girls, she is reminded by the adults in her life that she is not like them.

If Sophie is not a “girly girl,” neither is Paul “all boy”: he plays with dolls, picks flowers, and paints. By modern standards, he would very much be considered a sissy. Although Séгур frequently posits Paul as the foil to Sophie’s naughtiness because he seeks to please his aunt and becomes increasingly moralizing toward Sophie throughout the text, Sophie and Paul engage in plenty of *bêtises* together. Paul helps Sophie attach a pin to her shoe to fashion a spur for their pet donkey in Chapter 19. He is an accomplice to the accidental deaths of many animals that he and Sophie try to raise or tame together. Whereas Paul is generally more obedient to authority than Sophie, he is only considered “good” because, as the only boy in a female-controlled environment, his gender fluidity is not disruptive to the château’s expectations of socially acceptable behavior. While Sophie’s gender-nonconforming behavior sets her apart as naughty, Paul’s own brand of gender creativity distinguishes him as good, because his punishments and rewards are determined by women. In the absence of father figures, Paul’s gender goes unpoliced. Scholarly writings on Séгур’s works often point out a general lack of male characters (Lastinger 32; Giacchetti 198), but since it is typically the same-sex parent who engages in gender policing (Lippa 163), this woman’s world works in Paul’s favor. Sophie and Paul’s relationship becomes increasingly problematic because Paul gets to embrace the gender fluidity that Sophie is forced to repress. This inequity can explain why she periodically lashes out at him and becomes physically aggressive, such as when she scratches his cheek with her fingernails in Chapter 14, “La joue écorchée.”

In the last chapter of *Les Malheurs*, “Le Départ,” Paul and Sophie discover that their families will be leaving for America together to inherit the fortune of M. Fichini. During the trip, Paul develops a friendship with the boat captain and decides that he wants to be a sailor when he grows up: “Je serai marin quand je serai grand: je voyagerai avec le capitaine” (Séгур 187). Sophie dismisses her cousin’s future plans as

ridiculous and insists that Paul will always stay with her. When Paul asks her why she doesn't want to be a sailor, Sophie responds that she wants to stay with her mother:

Parce que je ne veux pas quitter maman: je resterai toujours avec elle, et toi, tu resteras avec moi, entends-tu? (Séguir 188)

Because I don't want to leave Mama behind. I'm going to stay with her forever. And you won't leave me either, do you hear?
(Smee 213–214)

As *Les Malheurs* concludes, both Sophie and Paul are beginning to recognize and follow their binary gendered identities.

Conclusion

Sophie's process of "becoming" is far from complete at the end of *Les Malheurs*. Her story fills the pages of two more children's novels by Comtesse de Séguir, and she undergoes many more misfortunes (in addition to the ones caused by her naughty behavior). She loses her parents in a shipwreck, loses her name when she returns to France as Sophie Fichini, and suffers the abuse of a vicious stepmother before eventually making her adopted home with the Fleurville family. Under the tutelage of the benevolent Mme de Fleurville, Sophie Fichini eventually transforms into a proper young lady, well-behaved and fit for marriage. This is the happy ending to her story – or is it? The present study encourages the modern reader to rediscover the spirit of 4-year-old Sophie de Réan and to celebrate this nineteenth-century "naughty girl" as a gender rebel worthy of an illustrated page in a future edition of *Good Night Stories for Rebel Girls*. Sophie's gender-fluid beginnings are arguably the purest expressions of her true gender self, and today's readers should be invited to contemplate the possibilities of who or what s/he could have become had her gender identity been allowed to develop unhindered.

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