

Pretenders to the Throne: A Reply to Alice Dreger

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As I believe I have shown here, this book [*TMWWBQ*] isn't simply pro- or anti-gay or pro- or anti-trans . . . It's significantly more complicated than it at first appears, and much more complicated than its cover and its title would lead one to believe. Most importantly for this discussion *TMWWBQ* is not the book many people assumed it to be – particularly after the phenomenal backlash it received . . . (Dreger, 2007, p. 201, my insert).

Dreger draws this conclusion at the end of Part 3 of her article; it is the conclusion I dispute here. In particular I show why *TMWWBQ* is significantly anti-trans. I prefer the term 'transphobic' to the terms 'anti-trans,' however, because while the latter reduces the issue to mere pro/con positions, the former suggests deep misrepresentation. Dreger points out ways Bailey appears pro-trans (Dreger, 2007, p. 20). For example, Bailey is supportive of transsexual surgery as a strategy for promoting happiness among trans women (Bailey, 2003, p. 209). However, this does not establish the book is not transphobic. The fact a man endorses a woman's right to vote does not show he is not sexist. Indeed, such a man may hold deeply sexist views about women – views so misogynist his recognition of women's right to vote simply pales in comparison. As I shall show, Bailey's book is deeply transphobic.

Dreger admits several respects in which *TMWWBQ* is likely to disturb (Dreger, 2007, pp. 18-20). Since she underplays these points, I discuss some in greater detail. Consider Bailey's contention gay men tend to be feminine and promiscuous (Bailey, 2003. Ch. 4 and Ch. 5). In his own admission, Bailey is undertaking to show prevailing stereotypes about gay men are literally true (p. 76). As Dreger notes, Bailey answers charges of homophobia with counter accusations of "femiphobia" (Dreger, pp.17-18; Bailey, pp. xi, 59). Yet Dreger does not observe why one might feel this is an inadequate response. Consider the stereotype that Asian men are especially feminine. Imagine a scientist aiming to show the stereotype is true. Does it make it any less racist if the scientist should then speak against femiphobia? Certainly outrage at such a project is to be expected.

Such considerations are relevant to Bailey's contention that "homosexual" transsexuals may be especially suited for sex-work (Bailey 2003, p. 185). Dreger fails to mention that transwoman as sex-worker (or as sexual promiscuous) is a common stereotype. In alleging this stereotype is true (and probably grounded in biology), Bailey is engaged in an enterprise similar to his project of attempting to establish the veracity of stereotypes about gay men. Consider the analogous stereotype of the black whore which has plagued black women (Collins, 2000, pp. 81-4). Imagine a scientist attempting to show black women are naturally constituted for sex work (on the grounds they are naturally sexually aggressive). Surely sex-positivity on the part of the scientist wouldn't erase the racism of the enterprise. Nor would his opposition to segregation or Japanese internment undermine the racism in the following comment (insert name and race):

Although _____ is so feminine in some respects, even some behavioral respects, [his/] her ability to enjoy emotionally meaningless sex appears _____-typical. In this sense, _____ might be especially well suited to prostitution. (Bailey, 2003, p. 185, certain words omitted)

To be sure, Bailey happily flies in the face of “political correctness” (Bailey, pp. x-xi). Yet while the view that “scientific” searches for truth (especially within the arena of sexuality and gender) are exempt from political agendas is extremely problematic, my aim is not to dispute it here. Instead, I propose the following: It is reasonable to believe the preceding remarks about Asian men and Black women would be (rightfully) viewed by many people as very racist and highly inflammatory. So it is reasonable to expect a similar outcry in this particular case as well.

The remarks cited above are not even central to the outrage. The outrage principally involves the concern Bailey’s book aims to invalidate the identities of transwomen. Dreger, however, erases the main way Bailey’s work is invalidating to transwomen by representing the central issue as nothing but a theoretical dispute.

According to Dreger, much of the dispute concerns Bailey’s rejection of a particular theoretical model of transsexuality (“the feminine essence narrative”) (2007, pp. 14-6). In this model (characterized by the notion of “the woman trapped in the body of a man”), an MTF has always self-identified as female (for as long as she can remember), has a core internal gender-identity at odds with her male body, and needs SRS to bring things into proper alignment (Bailey, 2003, p. 143, Dreger, p. 14). Dreger writes, “. . . Bailey would happily play Galileo to Blanchard’s Copernicus, spreading,

supporting, and fiercely defending a truth too often denied and suppressed . . .” (p. 15), thereby suggesting what is at issue is the rejection of a particular theoretical model (analogous to the Ptolemaic theory of the universe).

What is erased in this representation? It is difficult to state without already begging the question against Bailey. Since Bailey is critical of the very notion of gender identity (Dreger, 2007, 16; Bailey, 2003, pp. 22, 50), I will try to avoid appealing to it. Instead, I will speak only of the *personal import* gender has for many people. By this I mean, for example, living as a woman and being recognized and respected as a woman, is personally important for many transwomen in a non-erotic way. I mean, in part, when a stranger says of a transwoman, “Hey, that’s really a man!” this can be experienced as personally hurtful. It can lead to severe emotional pain because it is personally important to a transwoman to be regarded *as* a woman (and not as a man). When I say this personal import is non-erotic, I mean the emotional pain caused through invalidation does not involve the mere frustration of an erotic obsession or the derailment of a sexual agenda to be with straight men. Rather, it is experienced as deeply emotionally wounding in a highly personal way.

Unless the personal import of gender is recognized as a pre-theoretical phenomenon, no subsequent discussion about these issues is possible. Indeed, if it isn’t recognized, it is hard to see why invalidating a person’s gender identifications should be regarded as wounding. At best, the effect of such invalidation would be formulated in terms of the frustration of an erotic obsession or the derailment of an agenda to attract straight men. Why should one care about undermining somebody’s sexual fantasy – a sexual fantasy enacted in public? Certainly while calling a “homosexual transsexual”

“really a man” might make her doubt her capacity to attract straight men, this isn’t quite so bad.

So this phenomenon must be recognized as independent of any theory which seeks to explain it; I have tried to acknowledge it in a way that makes as few theoretical commitments as possible. Of course, one theory in which this phenomenon finds a home is the feminine essence narrative. Yet other theories recognizing this phenomenon, at least among “autogynephiles” include that even of Blanchard (Blanchard, 1993). To be sure, it is explained as a *secondary* phenomenon – a mere effect or extension of “autogynephilia” (to the extent the theory attempts to undermine the significance of *personal import*, it will inevitably be regarded as invalidating). But it is recognized nonetheless. In Bailey’s account, however, there is an almost exclusive focus on sexuality. He writes:

Autogynephiles are men who have created their image of attractive women in their own bodies, an image that coexists with their original male selves.

The female self is a man-made creation. They visit the female image when they want to have sex, and some become so attached to the female image

that they want it to become their own, true self. (Bailey, 2003, p. 168)

In recognizing there are some who “become so attached to the female image that they want it to become their own, true self” Bailey may be to some extent owning this phenomenon of personal import. In this account, the personal import of being recognized as a woman would be explained by appeal to the attachment of the “autogynephile” to the image of the female self.

Yet this phenomenon is so downplayed in Bailey's account it does no theoretical work whatsoever. Instead, all major decisions of both "homosexual" and "autogynephilic" transsexuals are explained in terms of *erotic motivation*. According to Bailey, the motivation to transition is largely non-rational among "autogynephiles" (2003, p.183); it principally concerns an erotic obsession with the image of themselves as women (p. 146). By contrast, the motivation to transition among "homosexual" transsexuals has more rational components: "Can I make it? Will I be happier as a female? Will I be more successful getting straight men as a woman than I am at getting gay men as a man" (p. 182). Yet even here, the motivation ultimately concerns sexual object choice. Notably, in this list of reasons there is no mention of the personal importance of being taken as a woman. That is: There is no acknowledgement that a "homosexual" transsexual can feel personally invalidated through being represented as "really a man."

By pitting Bailey's version of Blanchard's theory against the "feminine essence narrative," Dreger obscures the way Bailey's account involves more than a mere theoretical disagreement. Once we recognize the existence of personal import of gender, we can see why Bailey's account might wound or invalidate that sense of personal import in a way that is quite independent of any theoretical disagreement about the nature and etiology of the phenomenon of personal import.

Dreger observes that Bailey uses the feminine pronoun to refer to post-SRS transsexual women and at least in this way does not invalidate transwomen (Dreger, 2007, p. 18). She neglects to mention the obvious point, however, that the two major categories into which he inserts transwomen characterize them as *men* (Bailey, 2003, p.

146). In fairness to Bailey, these terms are not his invention and this general approach to categorizing transpeople in ways that run contrary to their own self-identifications has a long history in the field of sexology. Yet Bailey also explicitly endorses them, signaling his approval of their aptness (p. 146). Moreover, Bailey expects this terminology to apply to transwomen *even after SRS*. Thus he speaks of “autogynephiles” as *men* who have made their bodies conform to their images of women (p. 168). The idea is surely that the men trapped in male bodies have now become men in female bodies.

While she does recognize Bailey as a skeptic about gender identity (2007, p. 16), she does not take the time to point out why this attitude might be experienced by transwomen as invalidating. It literally means, as far as I can tell, their own sense of who they are doesn't count for anything. Indeed, this outright rejection of gender identity by Bailey, drags all personal import with it. Transwomen are represented as motivated almost exclusively by sexual considerations. Because he only understands the notion of a gendered self in terms of dispositions to behave in stereotypical feminine and masculine ways, he can say “homosexual” transsexuals are somewhat mixed gender selves in female bodies, and “autogynephilic” transsexuals are simply male gender selves in female bodies. Thus, while post-surgical transwomen are acknowledged by Bailey as women by appeal to their surgically altered bodies, they are denied validation in terms of the personal importance to them of gender. Ironically in such a theory, it becomes impossible to even formulate this invalidation, since it isn't acknowledged in the first place.

In fairness to Dreger, she draws sharp attention to Bailey's representation of transwomen (in particular, "non-homosexuals") as liars, who use the feminine essence narrative to cover up the sexual fetish. Dreger rightfully observes, "One gets the clear sense from the book that all transsexual narratives are deeply suspect – or just plain false – unless they fit Blanchard's theory and Bailey's reading" (2007, p. 18). Unfortunately, because Dreger mischaracterizes the invalidation of the personal import of gender as a mere theoretical dispute, she cannot capture the close link between the representation of transwomen as liars and the invalidation she herself erases.

In Bailey's view, post-operative "non-homosexual" transsexuals are really erotically obsessed men in female bodies while post-operative "homosexual" transsexuals are really highly feminine men attracted to straight men in female bodies. Because Bailey believes transsexual women tend to lie or misrepresent, nothing a transwoman can say contests this theory. Alas, the main way to determine personal import is to rely on first person narratives. Since Bailey casts doubt upon the reliability of such avowals of gender import, there is no way it could ever be taken seriously in his theory. This is to say: Personal import is first theoretically erased and then any evidence for its existence is banished by discounting first person narrative and avowals. In this way, invalidation and silencing go hand in hand.

These accusations of deception can be placed in a larger context. Dreger does not note this deceiver-representation is a *stereotype* that has long plagued transpeople (MTFs and FTMs alike) (Bettcher, 2007). While this accusation has certainly been repeated in therapeutic contexts (Prosser, 1998, pp. 110-11), there is also a more basic way in which it is carried out. Indeed, one of the most obvious ways transpeople are invalidated is

through being represented as *in reality* at odds with their *appearance*. One is “really a man disguised as a woman”; one is “really a woman disguised as a man.” Given this representation, transpeople can be viewed as either openly pretending to be something they are not or as deliberately misleading people about who they are.

Bailey’s picture plays precisely into this theme: Transsexual women are *really* sexually motivated men. The appearance that is stripped away is the lie of the feminine essence narrative and the politically correct cover-ups. (The lie may also be the female body of the post-operative which does not accord with the sexual reality of who this person really is). Bailey writes:

But will popular features on “the transgendered” begin to mention the teenage masturbatory cross-dressing? Will “The Cher Mondavi Story” become a made-for-television movie co-starring “Robot Man?” Probably not, and it is a pity. True acceptance of the transgendered requires that we truly understand who they are (2003, p. 176).

Notice this passage uses “Robot Man” as a symbol for the truth about “who the transgendered are.” It is worth recognizing how words can be used to publicly convey “information” about a person’s private sexual life in order to inflict disgrace or shame. Notably this potential (exemplified in the passage above) to sexually shame can be used as a strategy to invalidate the *personal import* of gender.

I conclude by observing the title and cover of Bailey’s book do capture one very important thesis. Surely, the title is about men who are pretenders to womanhood, fully captured in the cover picture of someone who may easily be construed as “a man in a dress” (or “a man in pumps”). Bailey’s thesis is that underneath all that false talk of

“identity” is a disturbing and yet titillating reality. And forget what transwomen have to say about the personal importance of gender to them: They are liars anyway. I hope I do not need to belabor why this was rightfully perceived as highly transphobic; certainly the fact Bailey countenances SRS goes no distance toward undermining that fact. I don’t think Dreger has shown otherwise.

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