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The Politics of Transsexual Love: *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* and Plato's *Symposium*

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At the heart of the recent film *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (2001) is the question of love. A stage play adapted and directed by, as well as starring, John Cameron Mitchell, *Hedwig* has become well-known as a queer film, exploring issues of gender, sexuality, race, nationality and performance. The film's story, narrated by Hedwig herself through voiceover and song, is roughly thus: Hedwig, born Hansel, is raised in East Berlin in the years immediately after the Berlin Wall is erected. The young Hansel listens to American rock music and dreams of escaping Communist East Berlin, which he does by becoming Hedwig, taking his mother's name, marrying an American G.I. and moving to the US. But the sex reassignment surgery Hansel/Hedwig must undergo goes wrong, and she is left with "a one-inch mound of flesh,"¹ the titular Angry Inch she eventually takes as the name of her band.

I frame love in *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* as a question, as it functions in the story in often ambiguous and unexpected ways. The prospect of love also functions as a question, or rather a quality of life put into question by a threat, in the real life of David Reimer, who became known in the 1970s as the "Joan/John Case," another instance of medical intervention gone wrong, a case I will elaborate to reflect back on *Hedwig*. I am providing a reading of trans narratives in light of and exemplified by *Hedwig* and Reimer. I will suggest that love in trans narratives, far from a pure or transcendental category, often operates as a mechanism of social

control and domination. The prospect of love or lack thereof, holds a threat that has been utilized to forcibly define the limits of intelligibility, of what will count as true and what will be possible. In this way, love operates as an instrument in what Foucault calls the politics of truth, the power/knowledge structures that define the possibility of what we can know to be true.

Hedwig and the Angry Inch is largely about origins. The central song of the film, "The Origin of Love," recounts Aristophanes' familiar myth from the *Symposium*. Hedwig begins:

When the earth was still flat, and clouds made of fire, and mountains stretched up to the sky, sometimes higher, folks roamed the earth like big rolling kegs, they had two sets of arms, they had two sets of legs, they had two faces peering out of one giant head, so they could watch all around them as they talked, while they read; and they never knew nothing of love, it was before the origin of love.²

Aristophanes' speech describes the original humans as being of three kinds; male beings who were the offspring of the sun, female beings of the earth, and "androgynous" beings of the moon. When their ambitions became threatening to the gods, Zeus cut the beings apart into individual bodies as we know them.

Aristophanes continues:

This, then, is the source of our desire to love each other. Love is born into every human being; it calls back the halves of our original nature together; it tries to make one out of two and heal the wound of human nature.³

At the end of the song, Hedwig directs her words to a "you": "The last time I saw you, we'd just split in two."⁴

To whom is Hedwig singing? Tommy, her future lover who will eventually betray her? Or perhaps herself? Leo Bersani's reading of the *Symposium*, which he calls "[p]erhaps the founding text of desire as lack in the Western tradition,"⁵ provides insight into these textual ambiguities. He reads Socrates' questioning of Agathon as instituting the idea of desire being a state of absence: Love cannot be beautiful if it desires beauty. But, as Bersani argues, Socrates does not in fact have textual authority; the *Symposium* is a "highly selective and approximate account"⁶ and the voice that might be given authority, Diotima's, is heard only through a recreation from Socrates' memory. This means "meaning itself is reconceived as a certain kind of movement"⁷ in

the text, which calls our attention to its “disseminated authority.”⁸ Diotima’s articulation of Love as an intermediary is a “textual echo of our textual betweenness” – a betweenness that Hedwig also displays. Hedwig’s intermediary qualities occur in her relationships, including her relationship to herself, to her own body and psyche.

Bersani continues, discussing Aristophanes’ myth, namely the question – can one desire oneself?:

If love in Aristophanes’ fable is a desire motivated by lack or need, what the lover lacks is identical to what he is. *It is more of what he is.* This is a lack based not on difference...but rather on the *extensibility of sameness*...All being moves toward, corresponds with itself outside of itself...We love, in other words, inaccurate replications of ourselves.¹⁰

In this movement of the self toward its self *outside* of itself, Hansel seeks to find his double in America, explaining to his mother that soldier Luther Robinson is going to “get me the hell out of here.”¹¹ When Luther leaves Hedwig in a trailer park in Kansas City in 1989, she is further distraught by news from the television that the Berlin Wall has just been brought down. The promise of love, based on a transnational and transgendered journey, had had politics in its scope the entire time.

Hedwig’s next lover, a teenager named Tommy Spec, is a born-again Christian whose father is an abusive Army general. It is of note that all of the men in Hedwig’s formative years are connected to the U.S. military: her father was also an American G.I. The betrayals and lost love she experiences are played against a backdrop of military presence. Tommy, explaining the Biblical tale of the Fall, another origin story, says, of Jesus,

You know what He saved us from was his fucking father. I mean, what kind of God creates Adam in his image, pulls Eve out of him to keep him company, and then tells them not to eat from the Tree of Knowledge? ... Eve just wanted to know shit.¹²

The story of paradise lost introduces the question of knowledge as well as its connection to the question of love. “She gave him the apple because they were in love,”¹³ Tommy says. Just after she sings “The Origin of Love,” in voiceover, Hedwig raises a number of questions of what exactly she desires, making love a question of knowledge:

It is clear that I must find my other half. But is it a he or a she? What does this person look like? Identical to me? Or somehow...complementary? Does my other half have what I don't? Were we really separated forcibly, or did he just run off with the good stuff?¹⁴

“[R]un[ning] off with the good stuff” likely refers to Tommy’s betrayal of Hedwig: while they are songwriting partners and lovers for a time, he eventually steals the songs they write, even songs she wrote before knowing him, and becomes a famous and successful musician. Her authorship, in a way the authorship of her own life, is stolen by the man who may have been her gateway to the western dream of freedom: the ostensibly All-American boy she mentors who yet betrays her by stealing her textual authority. The film’s present action consists of Hedwig and her band, the Angry Inch, shadowing his tour, playing gigs at diners and recounting the story of her life in song.

It is knowledge, or rather the lack of knowledge, that separates Hedwig and Tommy. While kissing, Hedwig moves Tommy’s hands to her genital region, when he stops and says, “What is that?” Hedwig pauses and replies, “It’s what I have to work with.”¹⁵ The unknowability of deviant anatomy creates a wall between teacher and student, lover and loved.

In *Undoing Gender*, Judith Butler considers the regulatory norms placed in the psychic life of gendered power, but insightfully also thinks through the body, how social knowledges about gender are present in bodies. “[I]t is not just that there are laws that govern our intelligibility, but ways of knowing, modes of truth, that forcibly define intelligibility,”¹⁶ she writes. Butler continues:

Justice is not only or exclusively a matter of how persons are treated or how societies are constituted. It also concerns consequential decisions about what a person is, and what social norms must be honored and expressed for “personhood” to become allocated, how we do or do not recognize animate others as persons depending on whether or not we recognize a certain norm manifested in and by the body of that other.¹⁷

To return to the case of David Reimer, I suggest that we may view *Hedwig* and other representations of trans love as existing within a certain disciplinary framework whose domain is knowability, thinkability, and intelligibility. Hedwig and Reimer share strange continuities, both being victims of medical mistakes that affect

their very personhood as viable gendered subjects. Both are in threat of dissolution in the face of the law due to their precarious positions in relation to and through gender.

Reimer was born as what we understand to be a normal, healthy boy, but at eight months, his penis was burned and severed by a doctor performing a routine procedure with a machine others found unnecessary, which he had excessively increased the power to and burned away a major portion of the penis. David's distressed parents heard of Dr. John Money, a popular and controversial doctor who argued that a child could be healthfully and successfully socialized as the gender other than what s/he was assigned at birth. Money recommended that Reimer be raised as a girl; they gave David the name Brenda and assumed things would proceed normally. But Brenda began to exhibit strong stereotypically "male" desires, which caused Milton Diamond, a gender essentialist opposed to Money's social constructionist thesis, to intervene. In his teenage years, David decided he wanted to live as a male, and underwent phalloplasty, breast removal, and hormone treatment.

Butler gestures toward a reading of Reimer's story as an allegory with his body as marker:

This body becomes a point of reference for a narrative that is not about this body, but which seizes upon the body, as it were, in order to inaugurate a narrative that interrogates the limits of the conceivably human. What is inconceivable is conceived again and again, through narrative means, but something remains outside the narrative, a resistant moment that signals a persisting inconceivability.¹⁸

The framework of power within which David developed can be found in David's recalling his doctors' advice and coercion:

Doctor said "it's gonna be tough, you're gonna be picked on, you're gonna be very alone, you're not gonna find anybody (unless you have vaginal surgery and live as a female)."¹⁹

I continue with Butler's apt reading of David's comments: "Here David makes a distinction between the 'I' that he is, the person that he is, and the value that is conferred upon his personhood by virtue of what is or is not between his legs. He was wagering that he will be loved for something other than this or, at least, that his penis will not be the reason he is loved."²⁰ It is clear that the prospect of love was cruelly wielded by David's doctors, who

threatened him with harassment and isolation if he did not conform to the ideas – the grid of social intelligibility – they had made manifest in his body. The “extensibility of sameness” and correspondence of a self “with itself” Bersani discusses are mediated in the terms and the name of social conformity, as well as the very intelligibility that sociality depends upon.

However, Butler insists that David retains a critical stance toward his circumstances and his existence within them. “Something exceeds the norm,”²¹ she writes, referring to David’s insistence that there is a difference between the value of what genitals he has and the *person* he is, the value of his self that may come to be loved. “[A]nd he recognizes its unrecognizability,”²² she continues: “It is, in a sense, his distance from the knowably human that operates as a condition of critical speech, the source of his worth, as the justification for his worth.”²³

Butler conceptualizes the normative “restrictive discourse on gender that insists on the binary of man and woman as the exclusive way to understand the gender field”²⁴ as one that “performs a *regulatory* operation of power that naturalizes the hegemonic instance and forecloses the thinkability of its disruption.”²⁵ The symbolic law, for her, is enforced by the iterative utterance of “It is the law.” This “utterance... performatively attributes the very force to the law that the law itself is said to exercise. ‘It is the law’ is thus a sign of allegiance to the law, a sign of the desire for the law to be the indisputable law.” Butler’s claim rings especially true for those of us who have felt distinctly policed by a law simply by a descriptive phrasing of what the law “is,” for instance, “Heterosexuality is just natural.” David’s doctors’ insistence on their correctness, as well as their simplification of terms – “You’re gonna be picked on, you’re gonna be very alone” – show the immensity of the “desire for the law to be the indisputable law.”²⁶ The stated lack of love David is told to expect becomes a performative instance of the statement “It is the law.”

Hansel also comes up against a law, early on when Luther, the American soldier who wishes to marry him, informs him that the government will be doing a full physical exam, meaning he will have to undergo sex reassignment surgery. The bodily norms that have impacted Hedwig’s life from the very beginning continue through his relationship with Tommy, when Tommy’s confusion at her anatomy sends him running.

Yet Hedwig, like Reimer, maintains a critique of the role love has played in the definitional norms that have shaped her life. Perhaps echoing the interlocutors in the discourse of love of the *Symposium*, Hedwig says, "I believe love is immortal." Tommy asks, "How is it immortal," and she responds, "I don't know, perhaps because...love creates something that was not there before."²⁷ In the inaugural possibility inherent in her statement is Foucault's conception of critique: "critique...exists in relation to something other than itself: it is an instrument, a means for a future or a truth that it will not know nor happen to be."²⁸ Hedwig's songs and performance – not least the performance of polymorphous gendered play – could be said to reflect what Foucault calls an "arts of existence," which he articulates as "those...actions by which men not only set themselves rules of conduct, but also seek to transform themselves, to change themselves in their singular being, and to make their life into an *oeuvre* that carries certain aesthetic values and meets certain stylistic criteria."²⁹ Hedwig's artistry, her persistent idea that love is creative, is the critical unrecognizability of her life, a question rather than an answer. Hedwig's transformation of her formerly male self, the German child who idolized American rock stars, into "the internationally-ignored song stylist, barely standing before you,"³⁰ creates a continuity of love, a practice, a labor of love.

ENDNOTES

1. *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, Dir. John Cameron Mitchell. Killer Films and New Line Cinema, 2001.
2. *Ibid.*
3. Plato, *Symposium*, trans. Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1989) 27.
4. *Op. cit.*
5. Leo Bersani, "Genital Chastity," *Homosexuality and Psychoanalysis*, ed. Tim Dean and Christopher Lane (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2001) 359.
6. *Ibid.*, 362.
7. *Ibid.*, 362.
8. *Ibid.*, 362.
9. *Ibid.*, 363.
10. *Ibid.*, 365.
11. Mitchell, *Hedwig*.

12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
16. Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004) 56.
17. Ibid, 57.
18. Ibid, 64.
19. Quoted in Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 71.
20. Op. cit, 71.
21. Ibid, 72.
22. Ibid, 72.
23. Ibid, 72.
24. Ibid, 43.
25. Ibid, 43.
26. Ibid, 46.
27. Mitchell, *Hedwig*.
28. Michel Foucault, *The Politics of Truth*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer and Lysa Hochroth, *Semiotext(e)* (1997) 25.
29. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume Two: The Use of Pleasure*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1990) 10-11.
30. Op. cit.