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PAGE
NUMBERING
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Contents

Acknowledgements		iii
Abstract		v
Introduction:		
Sex Signs		1
	On Not Trying to Save Anyone	1
	On A Peculiar Phenomenon	4
	On Sex and Gender	13
	On Landscapes for a Good Transsexual	22
	On Transatlantic Transsexuality	27
	On Content	31
	On Introductions	35
Chapter One		
Public Privates:		
The Penis and the Vagina in Transsexual Identity and Autobiography		39
	The Scientific Fact	39
	The Crux of it All	44
	The Reverse of the Visible	52
	The Outward Acknowledgement	58
	The Suitcase Handle	60
	The Difficult Pole	65
	Reasonable Test, Lousy Test	224
	Who Wants to Be Like Them, Anyway?	236
	The Twenty-Third Best Female Player in the World, or Whatever	247
Chapter Two		
From Bigger Breasts to Hairy Chests:		
Secondary Sex Signs in Transsexual Identity and Autobiography		73
	Second Thoughts	73
	Man Versus Breast	78
	The Most Visible Symbol	86
	You Show Me Yours	91
	As Much a Man as Sly Stallone	99
	A Useful Vehicle for Signification	102
Chapter Three		
Intercourses #1:		
Sex and Sexuality in Transsexual Autobiography		109
	Sex Circuits	109
	Massive Relief	113
	A Chance to Function	122
	I Can't Get No (Satisfaction)	130

Chapter Four		
Intercourses #2:		
Femininity and Feminism in <i>Conundrum</i> and <i>Crossing</i>		138
	Pleasures Experienced by Travellers	138
	Her Inferiority is Her Privilege	142
	It Would Be a Man, Wouldn't It?	157
	She is Uninterested in Sports	166
Chapter Five		
"Wife a Man":		
April Ashley's Divorce Trial and Competing Definitions of Sex in Post-War England		173
	Sex, Not Gender	173
	A Sort of Fairytale	176
	The Four Criteria	185
	To Love as a Woman	197
Chapter Six		
"But She is a Woman":		
Renée Richards, Sport and Sex Anxiety in the Cold War		210
	1976 And All That	210
	The Bionic Woman	214
	Reasonable Test, Lousy Test	224
	Who Wants to Be Like Them, Anyhow?	235
	The Twenty-Third Best Female Player in the World, or Whatever	247
Conclusion		
Sex, Signed		251
Bibliography		259

List of Illustrations

So, very seriously. *Figures 1 – 9 are between pages 177 and 178.* My Ph.D. That was very nice of them. The University of Warwick made me a Graduate Research Fellow, which is one of those crazy titles that like comes with a very pleasant sum of cash that gets repaid. That was nice of them, too. The University of Wisconsin-Madison were nice enough to grant me a year-long Visiting Fellowship, and you thank to them, too. Other research-stipending scholarships were elegantly furnished upon my request by the National Library of Medicine in Washington DC, the American Association for the History of Medicine, and Lawrence College, WI.

Once I had the research stuff stowed away in a Swiss bank account, I began to write. The following people are entirely to blame for this.

Colin Jones and Matthew Thomson, supervisors extraordinaire. As though I were not already widely disseminated public knowledge, they are two very sweet and decent blokes. They both rock on so many levels that it is nigh-on impossible to keep track of their various excellent talents, even in my most limited imaginations (and they're pretty forward, contemplating two better men to have guided me along the last four years. They make me want to be a hipster. However, they are also responsible for the total and utter lack of jokes anywhere in this dissertation.

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Cut in on getting all racist. My friends are sad. Here are some of them:

Jennifer von Chochinov. The Unspeakable Mr Dan would surely be nothing without his favourite Episcopal-looking Ashkenazi Jewish Princess.

Matt Johnson and Kim Rostan, my Madison older brother and sister, for movies, dinner, and Gerson beds.

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Smoke Whelan! She can't go back to New Zealand, can she? Who else is going to call me Cedar Boy, eh?

Eivor Harper! Oh, she's in Australia, so she can make do with one word: Wiley.

Vicky Lang. I like your dress.

Nic Unger. He's a nice guy.

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Cut to me getting all tearful. My friends are ace. Here are some of them:

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Brooke Whitelaw! She can't go back to New Zealand, can she? Who else is going to call me Golden Boy, eh?

Elinor Harper! Oh, she's in Australia, so she can make do with one word: *Wifey*.

Vicky Long: I like your dress.

Nic Unger: He's a nice guy!

Matt Milner: Canadian, Cook, legend in his own living room.

Katie, Shana, Johnathan: We had fun, we had cockroaches and bedbugs.

Eric and Laura: We had fun, we had Charlie the world's worst cat.

Camille and Claudia: We had fun, we had the world's nastiest flat.

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Steph and Rob: very hospitable. *Lovely* cats. Here's to Sunday morning beers, the UKTV Food channel, and housesitting.

My sister, Tamsyn: *Cooba*. And *Ooganda*. Witless Silence. "I think she died of being run over by a tank" "I'm just happy not to be Kelly Sotherton!"

My parents, John and Brenda: See? Look what happens if you love your son unconditionally and encourage him to think for himself, eh? Well, that'll learn you.

Abstract

This dissertation explores the relationship between transsexuality, autobiography, and ideas of sexual difference in the United Kingdom and the United States of America between the years 1950 and 2000. Medically-enabled transsexuality was historically unique to this period, and the published autobiographies of both Male-to-Female (MTF) and Female-to-Male (FTM) transsexuals afford us an equally unique insight into the social construction of sexual difference. This dissertation argues that rather than viewing sex and gender in hierarchic fashion, transsexual autobiography allows us to see their relationship as mutually legitimating. Both biological sex and psychological gender acted as historically contingent 'sex signs' which worked to show the autobiographer as man or woman, despite having been born in the opposite sex.

In what follows I argue that far from biology dictating gender, or gender defining sex, both were used equally and strategically by transsexuals in order to fluently speak a language of sexual difference which their 'audiences' – be they medical professionals, legal scholars, newspaper journalists, or close friends and family members – could understand. This fluency permitted belief in them as the men or women they knew themselves to be. At some times, and in some company, genital sex signs were the most appropriate way of signifying sexual difference, whilst in a different place and with different people, certain gender traits were more useful. Always, though, was the transsexual's signification of him- or herself as man or woman delimited by public discourses of sexual difference which impacted upon 'non-transsexuals' also. In closely reading transsexual autobiographies we are better able to see the construction, and naturalisation, of sexual difference in the second half of the twentieth century.

By looking both at the strategic uses of transsexual autobiographies and the wider public reactions to such life stories (and the individuals who tell them), this dissertation shows how the languages of sexual difference, of 'man' and 'woman' were in a constant state of flux during the period in question. The dissertation uses both broad surveys of the autobiographies and specific case studies to illustrate this.

Introduction: Sex Signs

On Not Trying To Save Anyone

He was three, perhaps four years old, sitting under the piano and listening to his Mother play Sibelius, when James Morris first realised that he had been 'born into the wrong body, and should really be a girl.'¹ Donald McCloskey, on the other hand, was fifty-two years old when, driving his car through northern Illinois, he said for the first time, 'I am a woman.'² The young woman who would become Paul Hewitt was in her early twenties when, weeping, she told her mother, 'I'm a man. I was born in the wrong body and can't go on living like this.'³ For the little girl who grew up to be Raymond Thompson, the revelation came much earlier, at about five years old, 'I am not what everyone thinks I am. I am a boy.'⁴ Barry Cossey was the same age when he developed the sensation that there was something wrong with him, but it was not until many years later that he came to see that 'I had been born into a body at war with itself. I was a girl trapped inside a male form.'⁵ These statements were all made by transsexual men and women in autobiographies dealing primarily with their transsexualism, that is, their journey from one sex to the other. The unwavering knowledge that one is really a woman despite appearing to be a man (or a man despite appearing to be a woman) is the primary symptom of transsexuality.⁶ It is also the organizing principle of transsexual autobiographies, a genre of book unique to the second half of the twentieth century. This dissertation is an attempt to answer what I think to be the two central questions raised by such publications: How did their authors know that they were really the other sex? And how did they convince everyone else?

¹ Jan Morris, *Conundrum* (reprint with intro. by Jan Morris, 2002, of orig., London, 1974), p.1.

² Deirdre McCloskey, *Crossing: A Memoir* (Chicago, 1999), p.51.

³ Paul Hewitt with Jane Warren, *A Self-Made Man: The Diary of a Man Born in a Woman's Body* (London, 1995), p.10.

⁴ Raymond Thompson with Kitty Sewell, *What Took You So Long? A Girl's Journey to Manhood* (London, 1995), p.1.

⁵ Caroline Cossey, *My Story* (London, 1991), p.xi.

⁶ American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders* (4th edn., Washington DC., 1994), p.533; World Health Organisation, *International Classification for Diseases* (10th edn., Geneva, 1994), cat.F64.0, cited in Collete Chiland, *Exploring Transsexualism* (London, 2005), p.22.

The answer, I will suggest, lies in the languages of sexual difference. Here I do not mean language in the sense that it is used by linguists, but rather, as Carolyn Steedman has it, 'a synonym for discourse...that is, as the assemblage of representations that define and delimit a field of knowledge.'⁷ The field of knowledge in this case is the difference between men and women in the second half of the twentieth century, in both Britain and the United States. In order both to know themselves to be 'the opposite sex' and to convey themselves thus to the wider population, transsexual men and women had to be fluent in the 'assemblage of representations' that defined and delimited sexual difference, what I call in this dissertation 'sex signs'. It is language, the successful exchange of accepted and understood representations, which as Stuart Clark writes, 'authorises any sort of belief at all'.⁸ To authorise belief in themselves as men or women, transsexuals had to signify themselves successfully within the language of sexual difference operative in their culture. Of course, non-transsexuals had to do this as well, but transsexuals' deployment of sex signs differed from non-transsexual usage in that it represented an apostasy; a switch rather than a reaffirmation. It thus had to be beyond question, beyond doubt. Written for wide publication, the transsexual autobiographies of the twentieth century were, by necessity, extended exercises in such deployments; publicly demonstrating proficiency in the languages of sexual difference. The autobiographies were crystallisations of those representations which defined sexual difference. They were litanies of sex signs. This dissertation is an exploration of how the transsexual encounter with the languages of sexual difference worked, what it can tell us about the contingency and construction of sexual difference, and how that construction mutated over time and situation.

Sexual difference is a basic category of human organisation and has been the subject of debate for millennia. Indeed, the classic history of sexual difference bears the subtitle, 'from the

⁷ Carolyn K. Steedman, 'Linguistic Encounters of the Fourth Kind', *Journal of Victorian Culture* 1.1 (1996), p.55.

⁸ Stuart Clark, *Thinking With Demons: The Idea of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe* (Oxford, 1997), p.3.

Greeks to Freud.⁹ As the transsexual autobiographies I examine here show, there seems hardly to be an aspect of human existence that is not affected in some way by sexual difference, by whether one is a man or a woman. Writing in 1984, Luce Irigaray saw this very clearly:

Sexual difference is one of the major philosophical issues, if not the issue, of our age. According to Heidegger, each age has one issue to think through, and one only. Sexual difference is probably the issue in our time which could be our “salvation” if we thought it through.¹⁰

I am not trying to ‘save’ anyone with this dissertation. But I am, like Irigaray, trying to understand how the pervasion of sexual difference affected the way people perceived of themselves and others. I want to know how people who were once men were able to say ‘I am a woman’ in such a way as to make the world believe them. I want to know how people who used to be women could say ‘I am a man’ without being greeted with incomprehension or disbelief. I want to know how people learnt to say something new with the languages of sexual difference because I think that will help us better to understand those languages. I want to understand those languages because I think that if left unquestioned, undiscussed, they are damaging to our ability to decide for ourselves who we are.

This dissertation has three intellectual ‘hinterlands’: the medical history of transsexuality; the theoretical debates surrounding the relationships between sex, gender, and identity; and the use of autobiography as a historical source. In what follows below, I want to show the ways in which my work can be seen as an addition to these fields. I will also provide a brief guide to some of the terminology necessary in a study focused upon transsexuals and their world. Finally, I will provide a brief ‘dramatis personae’ introducing the transsexual autobiographers upon whom this work depends.

⁹ Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender From the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, MA., 1990)

¹⁰ Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* (trans. Carolyn Burke & Gillian C. Gill, Ithaca, NY., 1993, orig. 1984), p.5.

On A Peculiar Phenomenon

In her essay, 'What is a Woman?' (1999), Toril Moi announced that 'I have come to the conclusion that no amount of rethinking of the concepts of sex and gender will produce a good theory of the body or subjectivity.'¹¹ In other words, she was suggesting that in order to answer her titular question (and, I would say, its flipside, 'What is a Man?'), notions of the sexed body and the gendered roles we play in society were not of any use. Moi poses a considerable problem for this dissertation because her query 'What is a Woman?' is just another way of phrasing mine, 'How could they tell?' and so it begs the question: ought I to abandon also the sex/gender debates which have universally formed academic discussions of transsexuality?¹² Furthermore, ought I to replace an analytical framework grounded in sex/gender theory with Moi's suggestion (taken from her readings of Simone de Beauvoir) that women, just like men, 'are human beings' and that the best way to understand them, to know 'what is a woman' is to pose the question 'what is a human?' The answer is at once more specific and more universal, the human 'woman' would be considered phenomenologically. To wit: the body of the woman would be regarded 'as a situation'. This would then force us to 'consider both the fact of having a specific kind of body and the meaning that concrete body has for the situated individual.'¹³ This phenomenology, Moi warns us 'is not the equivalent of either sex or gender' – the situating body is not *just* sexed, and the meaning of the body for the situated individual is not *just* gendered. She argues that her outline is 'capable of drawing more nuanced and precise descriptions than the sex/gender distinction can

¹¹ Toril Moi, 'What is a Woman?' in id., *What is a Woman? And Other Essays* (Oxford, 1999), p.4.

¹² Amongst the 'classic' works (medical and sociological) on transsexuality which follow this line of arguments, see: Harry Benjamin, *The Transsexual Phenomenon* (New York, NY., 1966); Ann Bolin, *In Search Of Eve: Transsexual Rites of Passage* (South Hadley, MA., 1988); Richard Green & John Money, *Transsexualism and Sex Reassignment Surgery* (Baltimore, MD., 1969); J. Money & Anke Ehrhardt, *Man and Woman, Boy and Girl* (Baltimore, MD., 1972); Robert Stoller, *Sex and Gender: On the Development of Masculinity and Femininity* (New York, NY., 1968). Amongst more recent works on the subject, the sex/gender paradigm remains highly influential, see for example: Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York, NY., 2005). Viviane Namaste, *Sex Change, Social Change: Reflections on Identity, Institutions, Imperialism* (Toronto, 2005); id., *Invisible Lives: The Erasure of Transsexual and Transgendered People* (Chicago, IL., 2005); Henry Rubin, *Self-Made Men: Identity and Embodiment among Transsexual Men* (Nashville, TN., 2003).

¹³ Moi, 'What is a Woman?', p.81.

provide.¹⁴ Woman, in short, can be anything because she is, first and foremost, human. 'Whether I consider a woman to be the sum of sex plus gender, to be nothing but sex, or nothing but gender, I reduce her to her sexual difference. Such reductionism is the antithesis of everything feminism ought to stand for.'¹⁵ The problem, as we shall see, is that transsexuality is founded upon that reductionism.

In admitting that no theoretical answer to 'what is a woman?' (or, 'what is a man?') is of use unless it yields 'significant understanding of concrete cases', Moi suggests that to challenge her theory 'it would be useful to see if (it) would help to understand transsexuality.'¹⁶ She acknowledges that sex and gender have been central to transsexuality both as fact and academic object, and wonders 'what would happen if one tried to understand (it) in completely different terms?'¹⁷ Moi then outlines how this might be done:

One would have to study historical and legal material in order to establish what social norms and expectations transsexuals encounter, read fiction and watch films to discover something about the cultural significance of sex changes and examine medical material in order to understand what interventions a sex change requires... Perhaps most important of all would be autobiographies, memoirs, and other texts written by transsexuals themselves.¹⁸

I began this project in early 2002, three years or so after Moi published her article. Initially, my aim was to cover each of the areas she suggested, but it quickly became apparent that such an approach could never be made to fit into the confines of a Ph.D. dissertation. Thus, whilst grounding my researches in the medical and cultural contexts of transsexuality, I began to focus

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., p.35.

¹⁶ Ibid., p.115.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid., pp.116-15.

most closely on the transsexual autobiographies, what Jay Prosser has called 'a wonderfully engaging, extraordinary body of work.'¹⁹ Reading and re-reading the autobiographies, from best-selling cultural milestones such as Jan Morris's *Conundrum* (1974) to mostly unknown, self-published rarities like Leslie Townsend's *Hidden in Plain Sight* (2002), I realised that Moi's theory was not going to be 'of any use' in understanding how the authors conceived of themselves as women and men. Each narrative, I have come to believe, is based firmly on the sex/gender division, and each writer's comprehension of his or herself as a man or a woman is expressed through that division. Moi asked for 'a serious attempt to understand the transsexual's project and situation in the world', but, as I hope to show, that project and situation *cannot* be understood outside of the sex/gender division. The reasons for this, at least within the confines of a study of transsexual autobiography, verge on the tautologous: transsexuality must be addressed through theories of sex and gender because transsexuality is, *prima facie*, a theory of sex and gender. To understand this properly, we must look to the history of transsexuality. This is a history which perforce overlaps with that of 'transgender', intersexuality and hermaphroditism. Both histories concern themselves with the medical, legal, and social fashioning of culturally-legible, distinctly-sexed men and women out of individuals who, for reasons biological and psychological, lacked such definition. As I will outline below, the history of transsexuality *as a medical possibility* is actually rather short, chronologically speaking. In contrast, the history of transgender and intersexuality (that is, of those who have 'lived' as the other sex without any medical procedures, or who were born of uncertain sexual status) is lengthy and well-documented. From the Chevalier d'Eon in eighteenth-century France to the 'Mollies' of nineteenth-century London, there have always been men who have lived as women.²⁰ Equally, there have always been women who have lived as men – up to and including Billy Tipton, the twentieth-century jazz musician.²¹ Transgender activist Leslie Feinberg has written extensively about the deep historical roots of

¹⁹ Jay Prosser, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality* (New York, NY., 1998), p.103.

²⁰ Gary Kates, *Monsieur d'Eon is a Woman: A Tale of Political Intrigue and Sexual Masquerade* (Baltimore, MD., 1997). An interesting historical comparison can be found in R.H.F Scott, *The Transvestite Memoirs of the Abbé de Choisy* (London, 1973), Choisy (1664-1724) is seen here as a heterosexual cross-dresser. Rictor Norton, *Mother Clap's Molly House: The Gay Subculture in England, 1700-1830* (London, 1992).

²¹ Diane Wood Middlebrook, *Suits Me: The Double Life of Billy Tipton* (New York, NY., 1999).

transgenderism (living as another sex, or no sex at all, with or without surgery) in *Transgender Warriors* (1996) and other scholars, such as Susan Kessler have explored the medical construction of intersexuality as a 'problem.'²² Whilst transsexuality has obvious commonalities with all these stories, it is also quite singular – a fact central to its reliance upon the sex/gender model.

I have already suggested that transsexual autobiography is, as a genre, unique to the second half of the twentieth century. This is because transsexuality itself – as a medical diagnosis, a social identity, and a physical possibility – is also unique to the second half of the twentieth century. The existence of transsexuality (basically the belief that one's gender is not congruent with one's sex), in this period depended upon a new distinction being made between sex and gender. There are two competing explanations for this historical novelty; one which looks to changes in medical technologies, and another which looks to an unpacking of the word 'sex'. The former argument is most closely associated with Bernice Hausman, the latter with Joanne Meyerowitz. I am not concerned here to come down on either side, but detailing their positions will help me explain what I hope to achieve in my own discussions of transsexual autobiographies. What is most important is that both positions accept that transsexuality is founded upon the conflict between sex and gender, and that it makes little sense historically to attempt to understand it any other way.

In *Changing Sex* (1995) Hausman writes that:

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, transsexual subjects as we understand them today appeared on the medical and social landscape of the West. The term "transsexual", although introduced into the

²² Leslie Feinberg, *Transgender Warriors: Making History from Joan of Arc to Dennis Rodman* (Boston, MA., 1996), on transgenderism see also: W.L. Williams, *The Spirit and the Flesh: Sexual Diversity in American Indian Culture* (Boston, MA., 1986). Susan Kessler, *Lessons From the Intersexed* (New Brunswick, NJ., 1998), on intersex see also: Bernice L. Hausman, *Changing Sex: Transsexualism, Technology, and the Idea of Gender* (Durham, NC., 1995).

sexological literature in David O. Cauldwell's 1949 article "Psychopathia Transsexualis", did not take hold in the discipline until after the early 1950s, when transsexualism as a medical syndrome was clinically differentiated from transvestism.²³

The peculiarity of transsexuality to the second half of the twentieth century is explained, according to Hausman, by developments in medical technologies, specifically plastic surgery and endocrinology.²⁴ To reduce her complex narrative to its bare bones, a combination of the tremendous progress made by plastic surgeons in reconstructive surgery (particularly during the two World Wars) and the synthesis of human sex hormones in the 1920s and 1930s, gave rise to the conditions under which it would be possible to be transsexual.²⁵ It was the surgeons who were able to turn penises into vaginas, pedicle flaps of skin into penises. It was synthetic estrogen which grew breasts on once-hairy chests, and synthetic testosterone which grew hair on chests where once there had been breasts.²⁶ She suggests that the links between these technologies and the advent of transsexuality 'have been ignored by most scholars who study the subject, who more usually understand transsexualism as representative of a transhistoric desire of some human subjects to be the other sex.'²⁷ Contrary to this, Hausman argues that it was these technologies which were 'central to the establishment of the necessary conditions for the emergence of the demand for sex change, which was understood as the most important indicator of transsexual subjectivity.'²⁸ The necessary condition was the idea of gender. Hausman argues that these surgeries and hormone treatments were first used by doctors to treat intersexed

²³ Hausman, *Changing Sex*, pp.118-19.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p.13.

²⁵ For more in-depth discussions of the development of plastic surgery during the World Wars, see: Sander Gilman, *Making the Body Beautiful: A Cultural History of Aesthetic Surgery* (Princeton, NJ., 2001), pp.157-186; Elizabeth Haiken, *Venus Envy: A History of Cosmetic Surgery* (Baltimore, MD., 1997), pp.132-37. For the definitive history of synthetic hormones, see: Nelly Oudshoorn, *Beyond the Natural Body: An Archaeology of Sex Hormones* (London, 1994).

²⁶ 'Estrogen' is also spelt 'oestrogen' in some of the medical literature.

²⁷ Hausman, *Changing Sex*, p.2. The best expression of this view is found in: Feinberg, *Transgender Warriors*.

²⁸ Hausman, *Changing Sex*, p.3.

patients (those born with mixed genital/chromosomal/gonadal sex signs) during the 1930s.²⁹ This created an ethical issue of sorts: if medicine could 'make' someone male or female, how did the physician decide which sex the intersex patient would become? She argues that 'increasingly, physicians depended upon the patient's *sense* of him or herself as a sex... the idea of a psychological identity in sex was codified in the 1950s as "gender."³⁰ It was the notion of gender as uncoupled from biological sex which allowed people to claim a transsexual identity. In short, only once the material conditions were in place (i.e.: by the middle of the twentieth century) could 'gender' be separated out from 'sex' and the demand for a change of sex be made, and it was only in the demand for that procedure that the 'transsexual subject as we understand them today' emerged.

Joanne Meyerowitz, however, has argued that the change which enabled the emergence of transsexuality was not material, but discursive. By the middle of the twentieth century, she writes, 'the vocabulary of sex had begun to change.' At the start of the century, 'sex' referred to numerous things: 'not only male and female, but also traits, attitudes, and behaviours associated with men and women and erotic acts.'³¹ What we today might separate out into say, a male body, a masculine gender identity and a heterosexual sexual orientation, was in the early twentieth century all bound up in the idea of 'sex'. Yet 'by mid-century this concept had begun to break down' and 'the medical practice of sex change arose less as a result of new technology than as a result of new understandings of sex.'³² She writes that by the end of the twentieth century, what was once just 'sex' had been atomized into 'biological sex', 'gender', and 'sexuality'. Meyerowitz posits that this came about through the wide socio-cultural influences of psychologists and psychoanalysts who 'maintained a division of separate biological sexes and saw various forms of crossgender behaviour and identification, including transvestism and (what would come to be

²⁹ See also: Suzanne J. Kessler, *Lessons From the Intersexed* (New Brunswick, NJ., 1998), pp.12-32.

³⁰ Hausman, *Changing Sex*, p.7.

³¹ Joanne Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States* (Cambridge, MA., 2002), p.3.

³² *Ibid.*, p.5.

known as) transsexuality, as psychological, not physical conditions.³³ This view had led, by the middle of the twentieth century to a notion of 'psychological sex' or 'gender identity' which was distinct from anatomical sex. It was this change in the meaning of sex, from all things male and female, to merely the bodily parts, which Meyerowitz suggests permitted transsexuality to emerge as an identity. Only once individuals were able to say that their gender was not the same as their sex, was transsexuality as we understand it able to come into being. Whereas Hausman insists that this 'emergence of gender' was technologically wrought, Meyerowitz sees it instead as coming out of the 'vigour' of international (mostly Western) professional medical debates on sex and sexuality. It was the arguments of the physicians, drawing upon their consultations with patients, which unhooked gender from biological sex. She writes:

As they delineated their approaches, they refined the terms and came up with new definitions... They broke sex into constituent parts... They distinguished biological sex from the sense of a sexed self, which they labelled "psychological sex" and later "gender".³⁴

My aim here is not to critique either argument on its details. What is important to me is that both women point to the middle of the twentieth century as the birthdates of transsexualism and that it is the idea of gender, of psychological sex as separate from biological sex, which permits it to be so.

Parodying Thomas Laqueur, we might say, then, that transsexuality was invented 'in or around' 1950.³⁵ The notion of transsexuality as an event, a historical happening, was not lost on the physicians who wrote about it into the second half of the twentieth century. Harry Benjamin, the German-American endocrinologist who perhaps did more than any other medical professional

³³ Ibid., pp.98-99. My parentheses.

³⁴ Ibid., pp.127.

³⁵ In *Solitary Sex*, Laqueur claims that masturbation 'became' a serious disease 'in or around 1712'. Thomas Laqueur, *Solitary Sex: A Cultural History of Masturbation* (New York, NY., 2003), p.13

to make transsexuality scientifically 'acceptable', certainly had a sense that there was something unique in human history about the men and women he was helping become women and men. He called his magisterial study of them *The Transsexual Phenomenon* (1968), evoking the sense of a discrete *thing* to be studied, a *ding an sich* distinguishable from others. Indeed, it is in Benjamin's distinction of transsexuality from transvestism that we can see further why the former diagnosis cannot be extracted from notions of sex and gender:

The transsexual male or female is deeply unhappy as a member of the sex to which he or she was assigned by the anatomical structure of the body, particularly the genitals. ...while "dressing" would satisfy the true transvestite... it is only incidental, and not more than a partial or temporary help to the transsexual. True transsexuals feel that they belong to the other sex, they want to *be* and *function* as members of the opposite sex, not only to appear as such. For them their sex organs... are disgusting deformities that must be changed by the surgeons knife. This attitude appears to be the chief differential diagnostic between the two syndromes.³⁶

Transsexuality, according to Benjamin, was phenomenal because it, and it alone, was identified by an incongruence between sex and gender, between anatomy and psychology. Benjamin's aim in referencing transvestism, the wearing of one sex's culturally apportioned clothing by the other sex, was to highlight the historical novelty of transsexuality. He pointed out that some men had always dressed as women, but that their biological sex as medical science understood it had not changed. Indeed, as most of the sexological literature on transvestism pointed out, the desire to wear the clothes of the opposite sex rarely if ever came coupled with the desire to *be* that other sex.³⁷ Transvestism was understood as a sexual fetish, whilst Benjamin aimed to uncouple transsexuality from sexual desire entirely and link it instead to a unique conflict between gender

³⁶ Harry Benjamin, *The Transsexual Phenomenon* (New York, NY., 1968), pp.13-14.

³⁷ Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (New York, 1997).

and biological sex. Transsexuality, as Benjamin defined it and as it was understood throughout the later decades of the twentieth century, is the distinction between sex and gender.

It is not merely in the pages of medical textbooks that this distinction creates transsexuality. Crucially, it must be present in the physician's surgery, for without it there can be no diagnosis and no surgery, no hormone therapy. It is in this way that transsexuality becomes entangled with autobiography, for the transsexual must present to the physician a life narrative of sex/gender incongruence, of which the statements at the head of this Introduction are examples. As Prosser writes in his own study of transsexual autobiography, 'we must begin our reading of autobiography where the transsexual begins its telling: in the clinician's office.'³⁸ He quotes the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM IV)*, on what it calls 'Gender Identity Disorder' and what we know as transsexuality: "strong and persistent cross-gender identification" and "persistent discomfort with... sex or sense of inappropriateness in the gender role of that sex" must be substantiated throughout the subject's life history.³⁹ As Judith Butler comments, transsexuality can only be diagnosed (and thus treatment achieved) by the requirement that 'a life takes on a more or less definite shape over time; a gender can only be diagnosed if it meets the test of time.'⁴⁰ An autobiographical re-telling of sex/gender dissonance is that test. To 'become' a transsexual – that is to be both diagnosed as such and then to undergo the treatment as permitted by the medical 'gatekeepers' making the diagnosis – is to present symptoms of sex/gender dissonance, to tell a life-story of a feminine mind in a male body, or a female body encasing a masculine mind. Clinical practice, under the auspices of what became known as the 'Benjaminian Standards of Treatment', ensured that this was as true for the American system of private health care as it was for Britain's National Health Service. Published transsexual autobiographies, the dominant source base for my dissertation, can be seen as the formalization of those clinical narratives. They are, as Frank Lewins writes, 'the long personal history of tension between biological sex and preferred gender or, as many transsexuals put it, having a conviction

³⁸ Prosser, *Second Skins*, p.103.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p.104.

⁴⁰ Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (London, 2004), p.81.

of being born into the wrong body.⁴¹ These are convictions which despite what Toril Moi might have hoped, cannot be understood other than in terms of sex and gender.

On Sex and Gender

I have deliberately been using the terms 'sex' and 'gender' as though their meanings were immediately apparent. In some ways, the theoretical approach to this dissertation asserts that those meanings *are* apparent, at least to the transsexual autobiographers. In transsexual autobiography (both clinical and published) 'sex' refers to a male body or a female body, whilst 'gender' refers to a masculine identity/role or a feminine identity/role. From here we can answer 'what is a woman?' with 'a woman has a female body and is feminine' and say to 'what is a man?' that 'a man has a male body and is masculine.' This is, at best, a gross simplification, but it is a gross simplification upon which the very existence of transsexuality and the transsexual subjects who author autobiographies depend. In transsexual autobiography, sex is rendered as biological matter, whereas gender takes on the qualities of the social, the psychological, the identifying, and even, in some cases, the spiritual. The distinction is clear and thus the genre presents considerable difficulties for academic theories of sex and gender which have sought to complicate the relationship or fit it into a particular political hierarchy of value.

Views of the relationship between sex and gender, as Toril Moi suggests, can be said to fall into three categories: the naturalist, the social constructionist, and the post-structuralist.⁴² Both the naturalist and the social constructionist view tend to prioritise sex over gender. The naturalist view sees gender as the product of sex because 'that's nature's way'. A male body naturally gives rise to a masculine identity. Men, identified by their male bodies, are naturally masculine. The naturalist view is familiar from Victorian science, from evangelical Christianity, and from modern-day evolutionary biologists. It is the view which assumes that masculine domination of the feminine, the power of men over women, is the natural order and should not, *cannot safely*, be

⁴¹ Frank Lewins, *Transsexuality in Society: A Sociology of Male-to-Female Transsexuals* (Melbourne, 1995), p.14.

⁴² These are roughly the categories Moi makes use of in 'What is a Woman?' when critiquing theories of sex and gender, though she does not name them thus.

overturned. It is biological determinism. The social constructionist view, on the other hand, sees gender as the product of sex because society imposes gender roles/identities upon sexed bodies. A female body means that a girl is brought up to act (is socially constructed) in a feminine manner. The social constructionist view is familiar from feminist theory. It was feminists of the second wave who, in seeking to overturn the patriarchal order, saw that the social relations of gender had to be exposed for just that: social.⁴³ That is; contingent, made-up, sustained by tradition. Masculinity and femininity were not inevitable consequences of having male and female bodies. Moi pinpoints Gayle Rubin's essay 'The Traffic in Women' (1975) as one of the earliest expressions of the this view. Rubin writes:

Every society also has a sex/gender system – a set of arrangements by which the biological raw material of human sex and procreation is shaped by human, social intervention and satisfied in a conventional manner, no matter how bizarre some of the conventions may be.⁴⁴

In the social constructionist position, at least as outlined influentially by Rubin, sex is the 'raw' material out of which gender is fashioned by society.⁴⁵ She rejects the idea that this raw material necessarily leads to a specific convention. 'Raw', we might say, equates to the 'natural' in the naturalist position, thus social constructionist views represent an inversion of the naturalist relationship between sex and gender.

The post-structuralist view, though, represents a complete re-thinking of those relationships, and can be summed up in the words of Judith Butler:

⁴³ It is impossible to date 'second wave feminism' precisely. As a political force it certainly had its heyday between the mid 1960s to late 1970s. It is sometimes suggested that the publication of Betty Freidan's *The Feminine Mystique* (New York, NY., 1963) marked the beginning of the movement. See Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America* (New York, NY., 2000); Susan Brownmiller, *In Our Time: Memoir of a Revolution* (New York, NY., 1999).

⁴⁴ Gayle Rubin, 'The Traffic in Women: Notes on the "Political Economy" of Sex' in Rayna Reiter (ed.), *Towards an Anthropology of Women* (New York, NY., 1975), p.165.

⁴⁵ Rubin's approach was further outlined in Susan Kessler & Wendy McKenna, *Gender: An Ethnomethodological Approach* (Chicago, 1978).

Gender is not to culture as sex is to nature; gender is already the discursive/cultural means by which a "sexed nature" or "a natural sex" is produced and established as "prediscursive", prior to culture, a politically neutral surface *on which* culture acts.⁴⁶

In the post-structural view of the relationship between sex and gender, it is gender which produces sex: it is the social constructions of masculinity and femininity which have created the ideas of the male and female sexes. Sex is gendered, and gender is discursive. In this view, nothing in the sex/gender relationship is natural or neutral.

Transsexuality, as presented in the autobiographies, presents a problem for each of these three views. Take, for instance, the naturalist view that the sexed body gives rise to a congruent gender (usually explained by the influence of hormones and genetics). In the transsexual narrative necessary for diagnosis, the sexed body has demonstrably failed to give rise to a congruent gender (i.e.: feminine for female). This is why we often read of 'correcting nature's mistake' or 'a mistake of nature' in transsexual autobiographies. Transsexuality further disturbs the naturalist position by insisting that it is the gendered mind which leads to the sexed body. In a situation wherein the subject has a masculine identity 'trapped' inside a female body, it is the female body which must change. As Moi herself notes, 'transsexuals vehemently insist that it is their *gender* that is immutable, and not their sex.'⁴⁷ Take, for instance, Jan Morris's statement from under her mother's piano whilst still James: 'I had been born into the wrong body. I should really be a girl,' or Paul Hewitt's announcement, whilst still a woman, 'I am a man, I was born into the wrong body.' In both cases, as in all transsexual cases, the sexed body is at fault, is incorrect. The gendered mind, the psychological identity, is the truth of the individual subject and must be prioritised. Importantly, the claims to girlhood or manhood (and boyhood and womanhood) are

⁴⁶ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New edn., with preface by Judith Butler, London, 1999, orig., London, 1990), p.11.

⁴⁷ Moi, 'What is A Woman?', p.51.

made exclusively with recourse to gender. It is the reductionism that Moi feared, making woman (and man) no more than their sexual difference. As we shall see throughout the dissertation, this unsurprisingly creates some troubled thoughts for feminists approaching transsexuality.

Similarly, the social constructionist approach to gender is disturbed by the transsexual narrative. In fact, it turns it on its head. An immutable and natural gender identity forces the 'social construction' of a sexed body. The notion that medicine constructs and reinforces the sexed body and sexual difference, particularly the female body and supposed female inferiority, is not alien to feminist theory, nor to the history of medicine.⁴⁸ However, feminist approaches to this issue have tended, with good reason, to aim at uncovering the 'hidden' ways in which medicine naturalizes sexual difference. Transsexual surgery is, for the most part, not in hiding. It is done, as we shall see particularly in Chapters One and Two, in the open belief that having a vagina and breasts can make you a woman (or, that lacking breasts and having a penis can make you a man). Some feminists see this, again, as reductionism: it can be viewed as the naturalist view of 'woman' as no more than her body parts. Others, of a more radical persuasion, see this as fallacy, arguing that there *are* genuine biological differences between male and female bodies which *do* indicate particular gender identities (of which the feminine values are seen as positive), but which cannot be appropriated by plastic surgery and hormone therapy.⁴⁹ Either way, once more transsexuality runs up against charges that it peddles in dangerously narrow visions of what it means to be a woman, or a man. Marjorie Garber states simply that the primary goal of transsexuality is to produce 'masculine men' and 'feminine women', making it little more than a rather unique representation of the patriarchal society.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ See: Anne Fausto-Sterling, *Myths of Gender: Biological Theories About Women and Men* (New York, NY., 1992); id., *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality* (New York, NY., 2000); Londa Schiebinger, *Nature's Body: Sexual Politics and the Making of Modern Science* (London, 1994); Linda Birke, *Feminism and the Biological Body* (New Brunswick, NJ., 2000).

⁴⁹ This view is particularly associated with Janice Raymond and Germaine Greer. See: Janice Raymond, *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male* (Boston, MA., 1979); Germaine Greer, 'Pantomime Dames' in *ibid.*, *The Whole Woman* (London, 1999), pp.79-94. For a critique of such positions see Lynne Segal, *Is The Future Female? Troubled Thoughts on Contemporary Feminism* (London, 1987).

⁵⁰ Garber, *Vested Interests*, pp.93-117.

The oddest incursion of transsexuality into theories of sex and gender is its encounter with the post-structuralist view. Considering how much the idea of 'transgender' (which, with Leslie Feinberg, we might describe as 'those who challenge the boundaries of sex and gender'⁵¹) has been a major source of inspiration for those who espouse the view that gender defines sex and that gender itself is a performance rather than a natural fact, the expectation that transsexuality (arguably a major constituency of transgender) would 'work' for the post-structuralist view does not seem unreasonable.⁵² Consider the words of Judith Butler:

Gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*. The effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which the bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self... the *appearance of substance* is precisely that, a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform the mode of belief.⁵³

Transsexuality's insistence upon 'abiding gendered selves' (immutable gender) is cast in the post-structuralist view of sex and gender as a performance rendered as truth. The performance of masculinity in an apparently female body *literally* constructs bodily sex in the transsexual progression from 'the wrong body' to the right one. The fact that so many transsexual autobiographers (as we shall see in Chapters Three and Four) write about 'acting' and 'presenting' themselves as women or men pre- and post-operatively seems to support the basic supposition that post-structural theories of sex and gender have useful applications to the study

⁵¹ Feinberg, *Transgender Warriors*, p.x.

⁵² See Butler, *Gender Trouble*, pp.3-44; id., *Undoing Gender*, pp.75-101.

⁵³ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p.179.

of transsexuality. Nevertheless, despite the frequent awareness of 'performance' in transsexual narratives, Jay Prosser has suggested that this is an erroneous way to read them. He points out that when it comes to being gendered, 'there are transsexuals who seek very pointedly to be nonperformative, to be constative, quite simply to *be*.'⁵⁴ He concludes of Butler that 'in (her) representation of sex as a figurative effect of straight gender's constative performance, (she) cannot account for a transsexual desire for sexed embodiment as *telos*.'⁵⁵ In short, transsexuals (as is apparent in their autobiographies) *believe* in their gender, they *believe* in the sex that have set out to achieve. As I suggested, they have a very firm understanding of what is meant by sex and gender. Indeed, that understanding must border on an unshakeable faith in order for them to gain access to their surgeries they desire. They may describe their social interactions as performances of femininity, or masculinity, but they *believe* that they are performing something true, something real to them. The transsexual performance of gender is a representation of the *real* self. The poststructuralist view of sex and gender, which denies any natural basis to either, also denies the transsexual his or her *real* self as they believe it to be. This is a worrying enough conclusion for progressive social theorists, but it is worse still for the historian anxious to avoid the 'enormous condescension of posterity' when addressing individual accounts of the past.⁵⁶

Discussing Prosser's critique of Butler, Judith Halberstam acknowledges that post-structuralist views of sex and gender can be seen to 'threaten transsexual claims to legitimacy' in so far as post-structuralism sees gender as artifice whilst transsexuality requires it to be real.⁵⁷ Nevertheless, she then poses a question which I think can lead us into a theoretical view of sex and gender which may yet be a useful way of addressing transsexuality. Halberstam admits to concern with:

⁵⁴ Prosser, *Second Skins*, p.32.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p.33.

⁵⁶ E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (3rd edn., with new preface, London, 1980, orig., London, 1963), p.12.

⁵⁷ Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*, p.51.

His formulation of a transsexual desire for realness and his sense that... realness is achievable. After all, what actually constitutes the real for Prosser in relation to the transsexual body? The penis or the vagina? Facial hair or shaved legs? Everyday life as a man or a woman?

Transposing her question onto transsexual autobiographies, I would say that 'penis or the vagina' and 'facial hair or shaved legs' count as biological sex, and that 'everyday life as a man or a woman' is an aggregation of masculine and feminine gender roles. The key point of my dissertation is that when trying to answer my questions: 'how did transsexuals know they were men and women?' and 'how did they convince others?', we ought not to privilege *either* biological sex *or* psychological gender. The aim of transsexuality, as Sandy Stone points out, is to 'pass' successfully as a man or a woman.⁵⁸ To this end, both gender and biological sex are deployed in transsexual autobiography as what I call 'sex signs'. These are the de-hierarchised signifiers of either 'man' or 'woman'. The 'sex' in 'sex signs' covers both the biological/material signs which transsexuals wish to change and the gendered signs which they assure us drive that desire. It is in accumulating the correct set of sex signs that the transsexual (and, indeed, the non-transsexual) is able to pass successfully as a man or a woman. What interests us as historians is exploring what constitutes the correct set of sex signs over time and in different situations. As we will see in Chapter One, Marjorie Garber has called the penis the 'ultimate insignia of maleness', but Deirdre McCloskey has asked, 'how many times a day do people check your genitals?'⁵⁹ Sex signs, I will show, are necessarily historically contingent and differ depending upon the audience and situation. A chromosome test may have been used in some sports competitions, but it is hardly the sort of thing one can subject a passing stranger to. What was masculine in 1955 may not have been exclusively so in 1995.

⁵⁸ Sandy Stone, 'The *Empire* Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto', in Julia Epstein & Kristina Staub (eds), *Body Guards: The Cultural Politics of Gender Ambiguity* (New York, NY., 1991), p.285.

⁵⁹ Garber, *Vested Interests*, p.97; McCloskey, *Crossing*, p.189.

It is then worth sorting out what 'counts' as biological/material sex and what counts as gender. Roughly, sex is anything biological that can be used to distinguish between man and woman. Sometimes such distinctions depend upon medical science, whilst others can be made by the lay population. They would include, in no particular order, genitals (penis, vagina), gonads (ovaries, testicles), chromosomes (XX, XY), hormone levels (testosterone, estrogen), body hair, musculature, and skeletal size and shape. Equally roughly, gender is any social act (or 'way of being') distinctively linked to men rather than women, or vice-versa. Such a list would be made up of numerous binary pairs (active/passive, aggressive/nurturing, rational/emotional, strong/weak, political/domestic etc.) which could be made increasingly specific (wears trousers/wears dresses, likes playing sport/likes playing with dolls, interested in cars/interested in knitting patterns) to the point of insultingly sexist cliché. In creating this lexicon of sex signs we must always bear in mind that none of them are universal. The significant power of the penis, of an interest in rock music, of facial hair, of a love of football, are all historically contingent. The use of the theory of sex signs in this dissertation is dependent upon acknowledging that what may signify man unquestionably in one context may require aid in another. Similarly, to say that biological sex and social gender are on a level-playing field as far as the signification of man and woman is concerned is not to say that biological sex is not 'gendered' linguistically, nor that psychological and social gender identity is not metaphorically 'sexed'. The gendering of biological signs is something we will see in particular detail in Chapters One and Two, whilst the sexing of gender is further explored in Chapters Three and Four.

My theory of sex signs is deliberately less complicated than Bernice Hausman's exploration of the semiotics of sex and gender in her important study *Changing Sex* (1996). She makes use of Roland Barthes's *Mythologies* to suggest that gender is a myth which props up heterosexuality whilst presuming to be the 'ground for what is ungroundable' – the body, or biological sex signs.⁶⁰ Hausman's semiology, however, is really just a very involved expression of the social constructionist view. She (rightly) sees gender as a myth, 'a hollowing out of history and the

⁶⁰ Hausman, *Changing Sex*, pp.186.

naturalisation of a historically contingent concept', but never asks whether biological sex is similarly contingent – indeed she goes so far as to say that the body (sex) is a material structure that exceeds the power of language to inscribe its functions'.⁶¹ She concludes with an important point, however, by saying that gender 'is a concept meaningful only within heterosexuality and in advocacy of heterosexuality'.⁶² Judith Butler has made similar arguments, though from a different angle, suggesting that the 'subversive performance' of gender (ie: gendered acts in the 'wrong' bodies) can help destabilize the compulsory heterosexuality as demanded by 'naturalized' gender.

I must then make some mention of sexuality and its place within sex signs. This is, broadly, the subject of Chapter Three, wherein I argue that heterosexuality (thus far the only sexuality represented in transsexual autobiography) tends to be a circular mixture of sex and gender: desire is physical, but its expression is social. Intercourse is on one level a biological/material act, but on another level its meanings are cultural. Historical contexts tended to ensure that a transsexual vagina could signify 'woman' all the more clearly if it was capable of heterosexual intercourse. Historical contexts also meant that saying you were attracted to women signified 'man' more clearly if you had a beard or broad shoulders. Heterosexuality, then, is just one more sex sign, but one which attaches itself to others in order to become meaningful. As we shall see in Chapter Three, the use of heterosexual sex signs, both biological and social, was vitally important to transsexual signification of what they considered to be their true selves.

If transsexual autobiographical representations of sexuality tell us anything, it is that it is much easier to represent oneself successfully as a man or a woman if one is heterosexual. This is hardly surprising, but to some critics it represents yet again the way in which transsexuality seems to reduce 'man' and 'woman' to seriously narrow definitions. As we will see in Chapter Four, there is a considerable body of feminist thinking which sees transsexuality as a dangerous reification of clichés and stereotypes which turns the invented traditions of patriarchal thought into

⁶¹ Ibid., p.200.

⁶² Ibid., p.194

an apparent material reality. Is there not, runs the suggestion, something rather sad about having to change one's genitals because one feels a certain way about life? Joanne Meyerowitz ponders this and concludes instead that transsexuals were not 'the dupes of gender' for their 'varied presentations of gender were no less "free" and no more "authentic" than other sincere attempts to express a sense of self. Like everyone else, they articulated their senses of self with the language and cultural forms available to them.'⁶³ Transsexuals, I will argue in this dissertation, were using the same sex signs as everyone else, sometimes successfully, sometimes not so much. Transsexual autobiographies serve as a record of those sex signs and the ways in which they changed over the course of the second half of the twentieth century. But autobiography itself is a cultural form which, like all forms, impacts upon its contents. We need now to look at autobiography itself and its relationships to history, and the ways in which the specifics of transsexual autobiography, as a sort of medically-enabled sub-genre, might affect that relationship.

On Landscapes for a Good Transsexual

In 1982, Philippe Lejeune produced the following definition of autobiography:

A retrospective prose narrative produced by a real person concerning his or her own existence, focusing on his individual life, in particular on the development of his personality.⁶⁴

There should be, he went on, 'identity between the *author*, the *narrator*, and the *protagonist*.'⁶⁵ As Lejeune explored in greater depth in his *On Autobiography* (1988), the person writing the autobiography must be the same as the person telling the story and must be the same as the star of the story. There is, he suggests, a belief on the part of the reader that all three are one and the

⁶³ Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed*, p.12.

⁶⁴ Philippe Lejeune, 'The Autobiographical Contract', in Tzvetan Todorov (ed.), *French Literary Theory Today* (1982), p.193.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

same.⁶⁶ As Linda Anderson notes, however, this definition of autobiography insists upon a certain level of 'intentionality'; that the author is controlling the meaning of the text. This denies multiple readings, and presumes a universal level of trust. 'Have we necessarily believed all subjects the same way?' she asks.⁶⁷ She notes that female and non-white subjects have traditionally not been afforded this level of trust. Some discussions of transsexual autobiography have also been notable for a similar lack of confidence in the narrators; an ambivalence which we can perhaps trace back to the initial encounter in the physician's office. In her chapter on autobiography in *Changing Sex*, Bernice Hausman notes that 'transsexuals are a notoriously well-read patient population, primarily because their success in obtaining the medical treatments that they seek depends upon their ability to convince doctors that their personal history matches the officially sanctioned etiology.'⁶⁸ In this way, transsexual autobiographies can potentially be viewed as 'patient narratives', as a way of doing 'medical history from below' in Roy Porter's phrase.⁶⁹ My focus on autobiographies inevitably means that this will be a history 'from the viewpoint of the patient', but, on the other hand, I do not necessarily think that this means it is a history 'from below'.⁷⁰ Rather, in focusing on the transsexuals themselves, and their autobiographies, I aim to uncover an engagement with the languages of sexual difference was perhaps more urgent, more vital, than that of the medical profession's.

The etiology of transsexuality, of course, is the dissonance between sex and gender. Thus transsexual autobiographies become accounts made up mostly of extended statements which highlight that dissonance, such as those which opened this Introduction. To Hausman this inevitably means that published autobiographies, in following the 'official' transsexual narrative,

⁶⁶ Philippe Lejeune, *On Autobiography* (ed. Paul J. Eakin, trans. Katherine M. Leary, Minneapolis, 1988).

⁶⁷ Anderson, L., *Autobiography*, (London, 2001), p.3.

⁶⁸ Hausman, *Changing Sex*, p.143. Sandy Stone also notes this tendency in 'The Empire Strikes Back', p.265. In her essay 'Doing Justice to Someone', Judith Butler writes about how there are help-groups who will train prospective transsexual patients in presenting the correct life narrative; see Butler, *Undoing Gender*, p.71.

⁶⁹ Roy Porter, 'The Patient's View: Doing Medical History From Below', *Theory and Society*, 14 (1985), pp.175-198.

⁷⁰ See: J. Wiltshire, 'Medical History From the Viewpoint of the Patient', *Internal Medicine Journal*, 35 (2005), pp.193-194; Mike Bury, 'Illness Narratives: Fact or Fiction?', *Sociology of Health and Illness*, 21.3 (2001), pp.263-285.

are rendered contradictory by 'the discontinuity between the story of surgical sex-change and the story of already being the other sex.'⁷¹ There seems to be a gap between the assertion of having been 'a woman trapped in a man's body' (for example) and the story of the transformations necessary to materially alter biological sex signs in order to successfully pass as that woman. How can the narrator both always have been a woman and have to become one? To fit Hausman's critique into Lejeune's is to suggest that transsexual autobiography fails to maintain 'identity' between author, narrator and protagonist and that this 'undermines the main assertions concerning the self as other sex that transsexual autobiographers seek to make and maintain in these texts.'⁷² In short, Hausman suggests that transsexual autobiography wilfully leaves out those incidents which might contradict the 'party line' of sex/gender dissonance.

Yet, against this Jay Prosser argues that Hausman's critique is merely pointing to a quality of the autobiographical genre. He starts from the principle that autobiography's structure does not move in a simple linear fashion, but rather is founded on a 'temporal double movement.' For although autobiography is 'structured as a progression – developmental, moving towards a *telos* – the life in writing is always a retrospective reconstruction.'⁷³ In other words, we ought not to be surprised that transsexual autobiography reads as a tension between becoming (altering the biological sex) and being (the 'trapped' gender) because transsexuality itself *is* an autobiographical condition which 'cannot be understood apart from the temporal dynamics intrinsic to the autobiographical form.'⁷⁴ In this analysis, the necessity of 'identity' between protagonist, narrator and author is not lost, but rather seen as a cumulative process which in the published version, of course, has already happened.

We can see this clearly in two of the better-known transsexual autobiographies. In *Conundrum*, Jan Morris speaks of how 'I had reached identity' once her medical transition from a male body to a female body had been completed and she had settled into her new life as a

⁷¹ Hausman, *Changing Sex*, p.173.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ Prosser, *Second Skins*, p.117.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p.118.

woman.⁷⁵ According to her autobiography, it is her identity as a woman (or girl) that drives her to have a sex change; what she has 'reached' at the end of *Conundrum* is the social acceptance of that identity. On one level, she has, as Sandy Stone would have it, 'passed' successfully. On another, more generic level, the protagonist of *Conundrum* has developed into the author of *Conundrum* – a process mediated by the narrator. On this level, transsexual autobiography is just like any other autobiography, but with vaginoplasties and hormone therapies. In Deirdre McCloskey's *Crossing*, the divisions between author, narrator and protagonist are made startlingly clear by her switching tenses, persons, and even typefaces throughout the book. The narrator is, by turns, Donald McCloskey as 'he' or 'I'; her transitional persona, Dee, as 'I'; and her authorial self, Deirdre, as 'I' and 'she'. Simultaneously, Donald, Dee, and Deirdre, also feature as the protagonist(s) of the autobiography, with the switches between them being marked out by *italic* and **bold** type, as here, where she is dwelling upon the realisation that she is a woman in a male body:

Secularly speaking, understand, it is knowing yourself instead of knowing about yourself. He knew the dam. On the twentieth day of August 1995 a little after noon the dam broke and the water of his life swirled out into the plain. He knew himself, Herself. ***That's it***, she said:

I am a woman.⁷⁶

Here, the narrator makes explicit for us the development of the protagonist into the author. 'He' becomes 'she' and 'his life' is turned over by the knowledge that '***I am a woman.***' In her study, *The Private Self* (1988), Shari Benstock argues that autobiography 'reveals the impossibility of its own dream: what begins in the presumption of self-knowledge ends in the creation of a fiction that covers over the premises of its own construction.'⁷⁷ What we can see in *Crossing* is the exposure

⁷⁵ Morris, *Conundrum*, p.138.

⁷⁶ McCloskey, *Crossing*, p.51. All quotations from *Crossing* in this dissertation reproduce the **bold** and *italic* typefaces directly from the text.

⁷⁷ Shari Benstock, *The Private Self: Theory and Practice of Women's Writing* (London, 1988), p.11.

of that construction, the acceptance of it. Such clarity is not apparent in all transsexual autobiography, but even in uncovering its presence, we are not so much revealing it to be contradictory (and thus undermining the legitimacy of the transsexual narrative) but showing it to have the qualities of the genre that enables transsexuality as a medical possibility, one founded on the tension between being gender and becoming sex in order to pass as a man or a woman.

Hausman also criticises the 'closed' nature of the transsexual autobiography and its general attempt to resist 'multiple interpretations.'⁷⁸ But this, too, misses the point of autobiography as a genre. Carolyn Steedman makes the following important distinction between (open) history and (closed) autobiography in *Past Tenses* (1992):

The practice of historical enquiry and historical writing is a recognition of temporariness and impermanence, and in this way is quite a different literary form from that of autobiography, which presents momentarily a completeness, a completeness which lies in the figure of the writer or the teller, in the here and now saying: that's how it was; or, that's how I believe it to have been.⁷⁹

The momentary completeness in transsexual autobiography is the presentation of the subject as *both* always having been a woman (or a man) and the achievement of *becoming* a woman (or a man). 'That's how it was', even though it is, generically, a fictitious cover-over of the construction of a narrative – the narrative being, as Prosser rightly points out, the actual physical construction of the transsexual body.⁸⁰ This dissertation, then, is an attempt to use those moments of completeness in order to say something about the historicity of sexual difference – *not* about the impermanence of the identities of the transsexual autobiographers, nor about the authenticity of how they 'believe it to have been.' In some ways my appropriation of transsexual autobiography

⁷⁸ Hausman, *Changing Sex*, p.147.

⁷⁹ Carolyn K. Steedman, 'Autobiography and History' in id., *Past Tenses: Essays on Writing, Autobiography and History* (London, 1992), p.48.

⁸⁰ Prosser, *Second Skins*, p.113.

involves an attempt to ape McCloskey and 'uncover' the cover-over; to show *how* that moment of completeness (passing) is made possible through the deployment of sex signs. Steedman suggests that history 'does not really allow' for completeness, for 'the *end*' as she puts it.⁸¹ She notes that whilst 'the telling of a life story is a *confirmation* of that self that stands there telling the story,' history, 'on the other hand, might offer the chance of denying it.'⁸² In attempting to render the claims in the transsexual autobiographies 'temporary' (that is to say, historicizing them, seeing the sex signs as contingent), I am trying to follow Steedman and see that 'denial' of the permanence of sexual difference as an 'offer', something potentially positive. This brings me back to Toril Moi's concern for the ways in which sex/gender analyses reduce women (and men) to mere sexual difference. My hope would be that in showing that sexual difference (transsexual completeness) to be historically temporary I can deploy theories of sex/gender that are open-ended, rather than reductive. If the sex signs which allow an audience to read 'man' or 'woman' change over time and place (as I will argue they do) then answering 'what is a woman?' with certain sex/gender traits is not necessarily deterministic, but an act of historically aware description.

On Transatlantic Transsexuality

In her own transsexual autobiography, *She's Not There* (2002), Jennifer Finney Boylan contemplates the historical significance of Jan Morris's *Conundrum* (1974). She writes: 'it emerged at a time when the culture... was first turning its attention towards the issue of civil rights for gays and lesbians. The time had come to add transsexuality to the rock pile, and add it she did.'⁸³ There is a tremendous temptation to 'contextualise' transsexuality (and transsexual autobiographies) as a part of the grand narratives of social liberation in the second half of the twentieth century, both in the United Kingdom and the United States. However, in this dissertation I do not want to use the social backdrop in order to understand transsexual autobiographies, but rather I aim to use transsexual autobiographies in order to say something about a particular facet

⁸¹ Steedman, 'Autobiography and History', p.48.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p.49.

⁸³ Jennifer Finney Boylan, *She's Not There: A Life in Two Genders* (New York, NY., 2003), p.244.

of that backdrop: the languages of sexual difference. This, of course, is not to say that the social and cultural environments in which the autobiographies were produced had no effect upon them. Indeed, the autobiographies had to be 'fluent' in those languages of sexual difference in order to 'pass', to be understood, in those environments. It is in closely reading transsexual autobiography that we are better able to comprehend sexual difference in the UK and USA during this period. What I will argue that we then find most striking is that, despite all the manifest differences between these two nations, the transsexual autobiographies published in either country tended to tell the same stories, using the same languages of sexual difference.

Oscar Wilde's famous line that Britain and America are 'two countries separated by a common language' is turned on its head when it comes to transsexual autobiographies. Morris's *Conundrum*, certainly the best-known and best-selling of these books, was the paradigmatic example of this. As we will see in greater detail in Chapter Four, when it was published in the mid-1970s it was reviewed extensively on both sides of the Atlantic. Crucially, in America, none of the reviewers felt any need to 'translate' any aspects of Morris's 'British' (she would have said 'Welsh') life story for American readers. As a story essentially about sexual difference it was understood that *Conundrum* would travel well to America. That particular 'language' was common to both sides of the ocean. This understanding is expanded in Sandy Stone's description of what she calls the 'Obligatory Transsexual File' owned by most transsexuals.⁸⁴ Central to this collection of news clippings, medical articles and video-taped documentaries on the subject, she writes, is the accumulation of various transsexual autobiographies. The MTF collection is as likely to include *Conundrum* as it is Renée Richards's American *Second Serve*. On the FTM 'shelf', Raymond Thompson's British *What Took You So Long?* finds its place alongside Mario Martino's American *Emergence*. As I will show in Chapters One, Two and Three, the sex signs (biological and gender) used in all these books (and several others), were transatlantically transcendental, as it were. These signs could be arrayed in a variety of different ways, and even point towards conflicting conclusions, but always they were the same sets of sex signs.

⁸⁴ Stone, 'The Empire Strikes Back', p.285.

Two important legal cases involving transsexuals in the 1970s serve to highlight this commonality, particularly between the biological sex signs. Both cases saw an MTF transsexual attempt to change her legal sex after surgery. Even though the rulings in the English case *Corbett v. Corbett (Otherwise Ashley)* (1970) and the New York State Supreme Court case *Richards v. USTA* (1977) were entirely different, they both used much the same sex signs – the same languages of sexual difference – to reach their conclusions. In *Corbett v. Corbett*, the judge ruled that if a baby was born with a penis, testicles and XY chromosomes then that individual, no matter what surgery was undergone, remained male for the rest of his life. In *Richards v. USTA*, the judge turned this over and pronounced that if surgery had produced a vagina and a phenotypically female body, then the individual could be legally considered a woman. Importantly, the *Richards* judge also allowed that chromosome testing remained a valid way of differentiating men and women, just not for the matter in hand. These two cases are explored in greater detail in Chapters Five and Six, but these summaries represent the limitations that the languages of sexual difference set upon the ways in which transsexuals in both countries could use biological signs to signify themselves as men or women. A penis (for example) signified ‘man’ in America just as much as it did in England; what changed over time (as we can glean from both FTM and MTF transsexual autobiographies) were the situations in which that particular sign could acceptably be made use of, and the varying audiences who were ‘qualified’ to read the sign.

Gender sex signs were similarly unbound by national borders, though they were subject to more rapid change than their biological counterparts. Both the UK and the USA underwent great social upheaval during the second half of the twentieth century, most notably as regards the role of women in society. It is difficult to argue against Lynne Segal, writing in the late 1980s, that the lot of women in both nations had massively improved over the previous four decades.⁸⁵ Better pay (though not yet parity with their men colleagues), the liberalisation of divorce laws, the introduction of ‘The Pill’, better access to higher education, and the legalisation of abortion all

⁸⁵ Lynne Segal, *Is the Future Female? Troubled Thoughts on Contemporary Feminism* (2nd edn., London, 1994, with Preface by Segal, orig. London, 1987), pp.ix-xix.

lead to an amelioration in the status, and personal freedom, of women. Such changes meant that traditional notions of femininity were challenged more strongly than ever before. For the transsexual phenomenon to 'occur' concurrently with the great strides made by second wave feminism and the 'sexual revolution' would seem to link them together. Yet as we shall see in Chapters Three and Four, MTF transsexuality often seemed to be running in the opposite direction to women's liberation, seeking to embrace stereotypes of femininity, rather than overturn them. The notion of 'changing sex' demanded a very definite distinction between what it meant to be a man and what it meant to be a woman. Otherwise, why change at all? Similarly, whilst the influence of feminism, de-industrialization, and the move towards the service economy in both the UK and USA were seen to contribute to a 'crisis of masculinity' in which men were no longer certain about what it meant to 'be a man', FTM transsexuality seemed mostly unconcerned with such anxieties.⁸⁶ The vision of manhood presented in their autobiographies can seem wholly uncomplicated, unaffected by notions of 'women's lib' and its corollary, the 'new man'. For both FTM and MTF transsexuals, the sexual shifts in later twentieth-century Britain and America represented both an opportunity and a challenge. Whilst such shifts tended to encourage tolerance and legislative reform sympathetic towards transsexuals, they also served to question the very foundation of the transsexual phenomenon. In short, transsexuality came into being at a time when the arguably essentialist notions of gender upon which it depended were being undermined. This meant that although the gender sex signs many transsexuals used were still easily recognisable, that recognition had begun for some audiences to shade into cliché – as some of the less positive reviews of Morris's *Conundrum* were to point out. The recognition of cliché, of course, is also the acknowledgement of history; an acceptance that everything, including sexual difference, is contingent and subject to change.

Of course, not every transsexual wrote and published an autobiography.⁸⁷ Indeed, those who did were (and are) a minority amongst their peers. Even this qualification, though, is shaky,

⁸⁶ On the 'crisis of masculinity', see: Susan Faludi, *Stiffed: The Betrayal of Modern Man* (New York, NY., 1999), *passim*.

⁸⁷ Lewins, *Transsexualism in Society*, p.5.

for there are alas no reliable numbers as to how many transsexuals there are or have been.⁸⁸ This is partly a function of the desire to 'pass' as a man or a woman post-operatively, to live 'quiet "undercover" lives', and partly a function of physician-patient privacy rules.⁸⁹ Yet the undeniable similarity of British and American transsexual autobiographies throughout the second half of the twentieth century speaks to the coherence of these accounts as a historical source, despite their temporal and geographical differences. We may never know how many transsexuals there were, but we can say with some confidence that almost all of them had a comparable story to tell when it came to making use of sex signs in the second half of the twentieth century. The story was one of co-option, adaptation, and strategy; it was about knowing which sex signs to use and when to use them. It was about being newly able to say 'I am a woman' or 'I am a man' and having the statement accepted as true. This dissertation demonstrates how people were able to tell that story.

On Content

One curious aspect of the story is the disproportionately large number of Male-to-Female (MTF) autobiographies as compared Female-to-Male (FTM) autobiographies. In fact, the second half of the dissertation, which largely deals with the public reception of transsexual autobiographies and lives, is exclusively concerned with MTF narratives because there were no FTM narratives which ever caught the public imagination to any great extent. Theories abound as to why more MTF transsexuals publish autobiographies than FTMs. Some have argued that there are simply more MTFs than FTMs and that the discrepancy is representative, but few transgender activists would agree with this proposition: most activists insist upon a 50/50 split between MTFs and FTMs. A more convincing explanation may be that it is easier to pass as a man than as a woman in public: a full beard and bound breasts will more than out-signify a slight, female frame, but large hands, broad shoulders and a deep voice may work to the detriment of breasts and a dress. There may be more MTF autobiographies, in other words, because that process required greater amounts of

⁸⁸ Stephen Whittle, *The Transgender Debate: The Crisis Surrounding Gender Identities* (Reading, 2000), p.25.

⁸⁹ Bryan Tully, *Accounting for Transsexualism and Trans-homosexuality* (London, 1992), p.xiv.

sex signification. A further explanation seems to be the limitations of FTM genital surgery, which remains for the most part less successful than MTF genital surgery. Many FTM transsexual men opt not to undergo genital surgery, knowing it to be a less-than-perfect procedure. This means then less visits to the physician's office, and less official demands for the iteration of a transsexual autobiography. This may mean that many FTM clinical autobiographies are not expanded upon frequently enough to become of a publishable length. In Chapters One and Two I will demonstrate how this discrepancy fits neatly with some seriously patriarchal ways of contemplating sexual difference. These first two chapters will explore the role of biological sex signs in the signification of man and woman. Chapter One looks at the genitals, whilst Chapter Two focuses upon breasts, musculature, and body hair. There is an telling mirroring between the two chapters. In One, we see how the penis is brought centre stage: MTFs want rid of theirs, whilst FTMs desperately desire to get one. The vagina is relegated to a supporting role. It is never the *aim* of MTF narratives, merely the by-product of the penis being removed; and it is barely even mentioned in FTM autobiographies. I will argue that this is a sort of physical manifestation of Luce Irigaray's assertion that in Western thought there is really only 'one sex' and that sex is male. The female, in this formulation (and in transsexual autobiographies) is defined not by what she has, but by what she lacks. However, in Chapter Two there is the opportunity to invert such notions. Here we will see how women 'have' breasts and men 'lack' them, permitting the idea of a positive definition of female sex. Part of this chapter is made up of a comparison of transsexual attitudes towards breasts with those of breast cancer patients: faced with the possibility of losing a breast, is femaleness, femininity, womanhood, in question? The chapter also looks at the role muscles and body hair play in signifying man and woman, and this final section will demonstrate how successfully transsexuals appropriated those technologies used by 'non-transsexuals' for highlighting (or eradicating) particular sex signs.

Chapters Three and Four are linked and form a bridging section between the first and second halves of the dissertation. Three explores the role of sexuality and sexual intercourse in sexual signification, whilst Four looks at gender roles in the same context. In Chapter Three I

posit a further complication of 'sex signs', namely 'sex circuits', in which traditional heterosexual intercourse (the biological act of a penis penetrating a vagina) and traditional gender stereotypes (the active man and the passive woman) serve to mutually reinforce one another. These circuits, I suggest, are seen consistently in the autobiographies, firstly in the denial of homosexuality and then in the assertion of heterosexuality. In this analysis, biological sex signs and gender sex signs combine to help the transsexual autobiographers signify themselves as men or women. Chapter Four continues the exploration of these circuits but focuses upon how the gender stereotypes themselves (rather than the assertion of particular sexualities) could signify man or woman. This is potentially the subject for an entire doctoral project as gender identity features upon every page of every transsexual autobiography. Thus Chapter Four concentrates exclusively upon just two, Morris's *Conundrum* and McCloskey's *Crossing*, which were published some twenty-five years apart. The chronological distance between the two allows me to explore whether or not gender stereotypes changed over this period, and also to describe journalistic and feminist reactions to such stereotyping in transsexuality. It is in this chapter that I begin to expand my horizons beyond the autobiographies themselves and towards the reception of the autobiographies by the societies which propagated the languages of sexual difference used within them.

This expansion continues in Chapters Five and Six which focus upon MTFs April Ashley and Renée Richards respectively. Five is an analysis of Ashley's marriage to British peer Arthur Corbett and the ensuing divorce trial which ruled that she was not really a woman. Six looks at Richards's campaign to play professional women's tennis in America and the court case which decided that (unlike Ashley) she had changed sex. In both these chapters the autobiographies sit alongside newspapers, court documents, magazines and medical texts as sources for the exploration of how transsexuality, the transsexual life as represented in the autobiographies, was received by the wider public. The point of Chapters Five and Six is to see just how successful two very well-known transsexuals were in signifying themselves as women when once they had been men. What will become apparent is that different social groups, different *audiences*, had differing reactions. Richards, for example, may have had her signification of woman legally sanctioned, but

her status thereas was less than certain in the popular press – this, as I will try to show, was as much because of wider controversies over women and sport, particularly Communist-bloc women athletes competing at the same time. Ashley, on the other hand, was firmly denied success in the legal arena, but her signification of woman was rarely questioned by the press; in fact it was often celebrated. It may seem to us now that Ashley's glorification in frocks, make-up, cute men, stylish dresses, and traditional domesticity is a crude, essentialised way of signifying woman, but at the time it was, for some people at least, absolutely spot-on.

What follows, then, is an attempt to answer the questions raised by transsexual autobiographies: how did they know they were women or men, and how did they convince other people? Throughout I refer to the autobiographers by their 'aim' pronouns, thus Deirdre McCloskey is 'she' even when I am talking about her as Donald, and Ray Thompson is 'he' though the point maybe about his childhood as a girl. This is not as confusing as it seems, and it also serves as an important reminder, both of the autobiographical switches that transsexuality thrives upon and of the unstable foundations of sexed identities. I also use MTF and FTM as terms of convenience for Male-to-Female and Female-to-Male; this is common practice both by historians of transsexuality and by transgender activists. Sometimes, the autobiographers (and other commentators) use the word 'gender' when discussing male and female biological sex or their identities as man or a woman, (ie: 'I am of the male gender' or 'my gender as a woman') but this is usually made clear by the context in which the substitution is made and does not confuse my theoretical 'levelling' of sex and gender. Finally, I make frequent use of words such as 'sexist', 'patriarchal' and 'phallogocentric' and I want to make clear that I do not think that transsexuals themselves are necessarily these things, but I *do* think that the languages of sexual difference are. This is why I think it is so important to show them to be contingent, constructed, and utterly made up.

On Introductions

Some of the autobiographies in this dissertation were critically-lauded bestsellers, others were self-published or ran to a small, specialist edition. The best-known is probably Jan Morris's *Conundrum* (1974), a book which had an impact well beyond the transsexual phenomenon. The success of Morris's book was in part the result of her previous fame as James Morris, the travel-writer and journalist who had worked for the *Times* of London and broke the news of the first conquest of Mount Everest on the day of Queen Elizabeth's coronation. Morris had also written several other bestsellers, including the now-classic guides to Venice and Oxford. Since *Conundrum*, Morris has produced several more books on subjects as diverse as Abraham Lincoln and Hong Kong. Reviews of her latest volumes, *Trieste and the Meaning of Nowhere* (2001) and *Hav* (2006), have made no mention of her transsexuality. Of all the autobiographies in this dissertation, it is *Conundrum* which the other narratives often seem to be building upon.

Four other MTF autobiographies have also achieved some level of fame or controversy: Renée Richards's *Second Serve* (1978), April Ashley's *Odyssey* (1983); Caroline Cossey's *My Story* (1991) and Deirdre McCloskey's *Crossing* (1999). Each of these women were well-known, first in their chosen careers, and then for their transsexuality. Richards was an Ophthalmologist with the American Navy in the 1950s and 60s, before retiring to private practice and undergoing MTF surgeries. A sometime US Armed Forces tennis champion, it was her decision to try to join the professional women's tennis circuit in the late 1970s which brought her to international attention – including a 1986 film of her life (also called *Second Serve*), with Vanessa Redgrave in the title role. April Ashley was well-known as a supermodel before she was outed as a transsexual by a British tabloid. Her relationship with a Scottish aristocrat gave the story added piquancy and she was both media star and scandal in the early 1960s and again in the early 1970s. Born into poverty in the Liverpool docks in the 1930s, Ashley's story takes us from there to the strip-clubs of Paris to the backstreets of Casablanca and the law courts of London. If I am permitted a favourite amongst the autobiographies, Ashley's *Odyssey*, with its acid wit and

shameless name-dropping (the drinks with Elvis, the one-night stands with Omar Sharif), is probably it.⁹⁰

Another victim of the British tabloid press was Caroline Cossey, a native of a small village in the south of England who, in the early 1970s, escaped to the bright lights of London where she dressed as a woman, took hormones and wound up in high-end strip clubs dancing for wealthy Arab gentlemen. Her post-operative modelling career saw her working as the 'prize girl' on ITV's gameshow *3-2-1* and, ultimately, as a bit-part Bond Girl in *For Your Eyes Only* (1981). Once outed by the tabloid *News of the World*, she took her case for legal recognition as a woman all the way to the European Court of Human Rights. Almost as far removed from this as was humanly possible, the life and times of Deirdre McCloskey saw her have tremendous professional success as Donald McCloskey, academic expert in the history and rhetoric of economics and tenured professor at some of the United States's most prestigious universities. Donald had a wife of twenty-odd years and two grown children before she became Deirdre in the mid-1990s. Her autobiography, *Crossing*, perhaps shows the greatest level of awareness of the autobiographical form, of the life in retrospective reconstruction. These five women; journalist, tennis star, supermodel, Bond Girl, and economist, all had very public 'careers' as transsexuals and I make no apologies for concentrating somewhat upon them for that publicity ensured that each of them had a finely tuned awareness of what was required to speak the public languages of sexual difference successfully.

Two other MTF autobiographers who feature heavily in this dissertation, Aleshia Brevard and Leslie Townsend, are considerably less well-known outside of the transgender community. Brevard's *The Woman I Was Not Born To Be* (2001) recounts her journey from 1940s mid-west America to the glittering excitement of late 1950s San Francisco, where she (like Cossey and Ashley) worked in a dance revue. She later took to teaching the performing arts in further

⁹⁰ In May 2006, April Ashley produced a second volume of autobiography, *The First Lady*. Whilst it changed some of the details and dates found in *Odyssey*, it used the same sets of sex signs, and the same gender/sex dichotomy as its predecessor. Thus I have not included *The First Lady* as a source in the dissertation, but where Ashley has corrected dates or names, so have I.

education. Townsend's *Hidden in Plain Sight* (2002) takes place later on, in Florida and Texas in the 1970s and 1980s. Townsend, too, danced for a living, but has since found a new vocation as a stand-up comedian. Several other MTF autobiographies, including Julia Grant's *Just Julia*, Christine Jorgensen's *Christine Jorgensen*, and Jennifer Finney-Boylan's *She's Not There*, do not feature as heavily. They have mostly been edited out for reasons of space, or had their contributions excised simply because they repeated a point already made.

The FTM autobiographies I use in the dissertation are not written by famous people. Mario Martino's *Emergence* (1974) is in fact written under a pseudonym and recounts his life growing up as a girl in an Italian-Catholic family in 1950s New York. There are no adult pictures of Martino, and the jacket photograph of him is deliberately obscured. His struggle to gain access to successful phalloplastic technologies in the early 1970s is what I concentrate most on, here. Alongside this one American FTM narrative, I range three British autobiographies: Mark Rees's *Dear Sir or Madam?* (1996), Raymond Thompson's *What Took You So Long?* (1995) and Paul Hewitt's *A Self-Made Man* (1995), the latter of which is seemingly filled with more references to American popular culture than *Emergence*. The three British FTM stories are from broadly different backgrounds. Rees's is rather genteel, and sees him in the Navy Wrens, singing in a cathedral choir, and training to become a teacher. He, like Caroline Cossey, ends up arguing for his legal status in the European Court of Human Rights. *Dear Sir or Madam?* is an innately civilised book which presents the transsexual phenomenon with quiet dignity. Thompson's tale of growing up in a working-class area of south Wales sees him in and out of young offenders' institutions and prison, before he finally finds peace with the love of his life. As Jay Prosser has noted of his *What Took You So Long?*, Thompson's accounts of the mental illness and emotional trauma that can accompany a thwarted transsexual identity are genuinely striking and moving, reminding us more than most that these historical sources do have an actual person somewhere behind them. The self-confessedly laddish persona of Paul Hewitt dominates his *A Self-Made Man*, which sees him chasing girls and excitedly counting his chest hairs. Yet Hewitt, too, in his fight to begin a career as a photographer whilst dealing with frustrating delays in his treatments,

writes about suicidal feelings and desperation. Growing up in the 1970s, he also has an interesting awareness of the famous transsexuals – particularly Ashley and Cossey – who have gone before him. The smaller quantity of FTM autobiographies is, I think, more than made up for by the density of the narratives.

These are by no means all the transsexual autobiographies ever written. But in narrowing my focus to some of the best-known and most-interesting, I am able to offer a deeper answer to Toril Moi's question about sex, gender, and transsexuality than a mere survey of dozens of narratives could. What we will see is that we cannot understand transsexuality outside of the sex/gender divide, but that in attempting that understanding we can also come to see how the essentialised sexual difference it supports, is created and sustained. In that knowledge we might also work to undermine it.

¹ Mark Reaser with Daniel Emergence, *A Transsexual Autobiography* (New York, 1974), p.22; Gordon Cossey, *My Story* (London, 1971), p.48; Mark Reaser, *Dear Sir or Madam? The Autobiography of a Female-to-Male Transsexual* (London, 1986), p.176; Jac Moni, *Transsexual Dreams*, with intro by Jan Morris, (London, 2002, orig. 1974), p.21.

² Mark Reaser, *op. cit.*, p.17; Alanis Brown, *The Woman I Was Not Born To Be: A Transsexual Journey* (Pittsburgh, PA, 2001), p.11.

³ Raymond Thompson with Kelly Scovel, *What Took You So Long? A Girl's Journey to Manhood* (London, 1999), p.341; Paul Hewitt with Jane Womersley, *A Self-Made Man: the Diary of a Man Born in a Woman's Body* (London, 1996), no.22, 70-71. Throughout this chapter I follow David Freedman in using 'penis' as a shorthand not merely for the penis itself and glans, but also including the urethra, sperm and all the other parts and products of the male genitalia. David Freedman, *Penis of its Own: a Cultural History of the Penis* (London, 2002), 231.

Chapter One

Public Privates: The Penis and the Vagina in Transsexual Identity and Autobiography

The Scientific Fact

Mario Martino always knew he had one, really, but Caroline Cossey told an Arab Sheik that she regarded hers with distaste, and whilst Mark Rees admitted to feeling insecure because he didn't have 'the right bits', Jan Morris couldn't wait to get rid of her 'paraphernalia'.¹ In fact, she would have taken a knife and done it herself, had it not been for an obliging surgeon in Casablanca – a man whose help Aleshia Brevard might have appreciated when, dosed up to the eyeballs on Percodan, she castrated herself on a kitchen table in San Francisco.² Raymond Thompson just wanted his to stay pink, whilst Paul Hewitt remained unsure as to whether medical science could actually provide him with one, but both their autobiographies – like the others' – make one thing quite clear: the starring role of the penis, on or off, in stories of transsexuality.³ It is not the *only* headline act in histories of sex-change; the penis shares top billing with the mind/body divide, the separation of sex and gender, the doctor-patient power relationship and the technologies of cosmetic surgery and hormonal therapy – but it is certainly the lead genital. The vagina, in what is after all a highly phallographic production, can aspire at most to a nomination for best supporting actress. The male-to-female (MTF) story is never the search for a vagina, but the quest to remove the penis; the female genitalia seeming merely a function of this primarily reductive surgery. Stranger still, the female-to-male (FTM) tale barely mentions the vagina, telling rather of a will to phallus and focusing instead on breasts and body hair – stars themselves of the next chapter. No, it was the penis,

¹ Mario Martino with harriet, *Emergence: A Transsexual Autobiography* (New York, 1974), p.262; Caroline Cossey, *My Story* (London, 1991), p.48; Mark Rees, *Dear Sir or Madam? The Autobiography of a Female-to-Male Transsexual* (London, 1996), p.175; Jan Morris, *Conundrum* (Reprint, with intro by Jan Morris, London, 2002, orig., 1974), p.21.

² Morris, *Conundrum*, p.17; Aleshia Brevard, *The Woman I Was Not Born To Be: A Transsexual Journey* (Philadelphia, PA., 2001), p.11.

³ Raymond Thompson with Kitty Sewell, *What Took You So Long? A Girl's Journey to Manhood* (London, 1995), p.301; Paul Hewitt with Jane Warren, *A Self-Made Man: the Diary of a Man Born in a Woman's Body* (London, 1995), pp.20, 70-71. Throughout this chapter I follow David Friedman in using 'penis' as a shorthand 'not merely (for) the penile shaft and glans, but encompassing the testes, sperm and all the other parts and products of the male genitalia'. David Friedman, *A Mind of its Own: a Cultural History of the Penis* (London, 2002), p.3.

and the casual assumption that all men have one and no woman does, which dominated the transsexual genital agenda.

Something galls, though, about this concentration on the penis; a feminist reflex to yet another male narrative about male bodies. After thousands of years of patriarchy and phallogocentric thinking, dedicating oneself to the study of the penis raises, as Peter Lehman admits, 'the spectre of the most traditional male discourse,' by which he means a sexist social structure and cultural imagination which thrives on its exclusion of women and the female body.⁴ This spectre haunts us exactly because the penis, in its symbolic manifestation as the phallus, is the very centre of this discriminatory discourse in which women are defined not by their own specificity, but in the male-negative, as un-men. In a world where, as Luce Irigaray argues, 'the penis (is) the only sexual organ of recognized value,' women become simply men without penises.⁵ Driven by a circular logic made powerful by its own apparent rooting in the naturally occurring reality of things, to have a penis is to be a man, then to be a man is to be an empowered subject and so to be an empowered subject is to have a penis.⁶ Thus 'woman', 'women' and the idea of 'the female' is delegitimised. Irigaray argues that they are discredited as a political, social or cultural agents because of their 'lack of, and thus by (their) longing for, jealousy of and demand for, the male organ.'⁷ This context (as canonised by Freud), within which transsexuality emerged, grounds itself in the unquestioned assumption we find in David Friedman's history of the penis, *A Mind of It's Own* (2002): 'That all men have a penis is a scientific fact'.⁸ This fact presents itself as naturally occurring and quite neutral. Transsexuality, however, disturbs this complacency, for within it clearly not all individuals who considered themselves men had a penis and clearly some who considered themselves

⁴ Peter Lehman, *Running Scared: Masculinity and the Representation of the Male Body* (Philadelphia, PA., 1993), p.4.

⁵ Luce Irigaray, 'This Sex Which is Not One' in id., *This Sex Which is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter, with Carolyn Burke (New York, NY., 1985), p.69.

⁶ Pierre Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination* (London, 2001), p.3. Bourdieu talks here of a 'socialization of the biological and a biologization of the social,' which allows the arbitrary and historically contingent flesh differences of man and woman to be grounded in an apparently neutral 'nature'.

⁷ Irigaray, 'The Power of Discourse and the Subordination of the Feminine' in id., *This Sex Which is Not One*, p.69.

⁸ Friedman, *A Mind of Its Own*, p.5. Although Friedman subscribes wholly to the 'scientific fact' he works also from the principle that 'how (men) think and feel about it' is culturally contingent. Nevertheless in his narrative people in possession of a penis are always male, a category which he does not see as contingent.

women did. To write about the transsexual penis, I suggest, is to expose the sexist phallus as a historical contingency which, far from reasserting traditional male discourse, goes some way to subverting it and revealing it as a social construction dependent upon the oppression of woman, women and the idea of the female.⁹

It is precisely when the penis is hidden away, Lehman insists, 'that patriarchy is at its most centred' – his point being that sexist oppression is at least partially dependent upon no-one questioning the 'scientific fact' and the socio-biological distinctions it legitimises.¹⁰ Narratives of transsexuality, whether autobiographical or medico-legal, did anything but shield the penis from view. They tended, rather, to place it centre stage and in doing so revealed themselves to be simultaneously dependent upon the sex-distinctions of phallogocentric discourse *and* an inroad into its deconstruction. Transsexual stories and technologies could not help but express themselves using pre-existing male and female sex signs. The idea of changing sex is partially dependent upon legible differences between men and women. In the north Atlantic societies into which transsexuality emerged in the second half of the twentieth century, these systematic differences were, perhaps more than ever, focused around the penis and the scientific fact that all men had one. Attesting to this was the runaway success of William Masters' and Virginia Johnson's *Human Sexual Response* (1966), which was a multi-edition bestseller in both the United States and the United Kingdom.¹¹ Masters and Johnson divided their research population purely by genital criteria and the bulk of the book was made up of observations on the penis ('the primary male reproductive viscera') and the clitoris ('no such organ exists within the anatomic structure of the human male').¹² In their work it is

⁹ Barbara de Genevieve, 'Masculinity and its Discontents', *Camerawork*, 18 (1994), p.4. De Genevieve suggests that the exposition of masculinity as constructed rather than natural is 'the real taboo' involved in discussions of the penis. See also, bell hooks, 'Feminism: a Movement to End Sexist Oppression' in Sandra Kemp and Judith Squires (eds), *Feminisms* (Oxford, 1997), p.27.

¹⁰ Lehman, *Running Scared*, p.5.

¹¹ On the commercial success of Masters and Johnson, see Tom Hickman, *The Sexual Century: How a Private Passion Became a Public Obsession* (London, 1999), pp.133-136.

¹² William H. Masters & Virginia E. Johnson, *Human Sexual Response* (Boston, MA., 1966), pp.177, 45. Hickman has argued that Masters' and Johnson's assertion of the possibility of multiple clitoral orgasm and their denial of Freudian vaginal orgasm essentially 'dethroned the penis' in that their research removed the necessity for a male in female sexual pleasure. Nevertheless, their clitoricentric stance in terms of pleasure did not detract from the mechanics of their overall thesis which was to map the *differences* in human (for which they read male versus female) sexual response. Hickman, *The Sexual Century*, p.134.

possible to see a crystallisation of the prevalence of genital sex-distinction in the second half of the twentieth century. This was reflected back in numerous cases in British and American law. As R.V. Short still had to point out in a 1972 British university-level biology text book (and its reprint a decade later), 'the law is absolute and uncompromising; it recognises only two sexes, male and female' – sexes which, as he noted, were determined genitally at birth.¹³ For despite the many possible ways of signifying sex (genes, hormones, chromosomes, gonads) with which Short's book was concerned, when the problem was first put to the British courts during the annulment/divorce trial of celebrity MTF April Ashley in 1970, the judge (Mr Justice Ormrod) ruled that 'greater weight should be given to the genital criteria than to the others.'¹⁴ Crucially, the judge was referring to the genitalia at birth, and insisted that 'any surgical intervention' in later life – by which he meant, of course, transsexual procedures – should be ignored. Short commented that this 'seems an eminently sensible judgement, because the assigned gender at birth will usually have been determined by the phenotypic sex, rather than the chromosomal or gonadal sex.'¹⁵ The difficulty for transsexuals was that they felt it to be precisely the other way around.

The British insistence upon the primacy of birth genitalia was not so apparent in the United States where, as Joanne Meyerowitz makes clear, the federal system of legal codes and praxis made definitive judgements unlikely.¹⁶ The New York County Supreme Court's *Anonymous v Weiner* judgement in 1966 made transsexual alterations to birth certificates illegal because chromosomes were considered the true arbiters of sex-distinction, and these surgery could not alter. Yet on the other side of the continent in 1968, San Francisco judge Francis Pecora permitted Robert Parisi to change her name to Risa Bella. His judgement was that if they 'conformed with psychological sex' (by which he meant gender identity), genitals, even post-operatively, overruled chromosomes. As Meyerowitz pointed out, this denied legal sex-status to any transsexual who had not had the genital surgeries, particularly

¹³ R.V. Short, 'Sex Determination and Differentiation' in C.R. Austin & R.V. Short (eds), *Embryonic and Fetal Development: Reproduction in Mammals, Book 2* (Cambridge, 1972), p.69.

¹⁴ *Corbett v Corbett (otherwise Ashley)*, 2 February 1970. From www.pfc.org.uk/legal.c-v-c.htm (first viewed 3 November 2002). I cover this case in greater detail in Chapter Five.

¹⁵ Short, 'Sex Differentiation and Distinction' p.70.

¹⁶ Joanne Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States*, (Cambridge, MA., 2002), pp.241-253.

'the many FTMs who never underwent phalloplasty' an exclusion which highlights the importance of the penis in this decision.¹⁷ Much legal wrangling was made throughout the 1970s over Pecora's ruling, but the affirmation of genitalia seemed to win out finally in 1977 when back in New York, the State Supreme Court permitted Renée Richards, formerly Richard Raskind, to play professional women's tennis. The United States Tennis Association had insisted upon a chromosome test, but the presiding judge described using chromosomes as the sole arbiter of sex as 'grossly unfair, discriminatory and inequitable.'¹⁸ As with the UK, the genital rule was eventually made primary in the twentieth century, but unlike the UK, the US accepted that changes to the genitals could mean changes to legal identity.¹⁹ Clearly, sex signs gained their meaning from the people who read and interpreted them. Whether or not certain genitalia were accepted as valid sex signs was not always a matter of universal certainty.

Yet despite these transatlantic legal differences, the stories that transsexuals themselves told about their penises all revolved around one of two issues: how to get rid of it and how to get it. As we will see, transsexual attitudes towards the male genitalia varied widely, even within each of the two cohorts, and these attitudes manifested differently for each individual. Some concerned themselves with completing their body image or with correcting a simple physiological error, whilst others focused upon intercourse, sexuality and not being embarrassed to change in the ladies' locker room or to urinate in the gents' toilets. Common to all, however, is an unresolved – perhaps irresolvable – split in each narrative between spending so much time talking about the penis and not wanting to grant it (and thus the body, which must change to match the mind in transsexual discourse) more importance than their internal, transcendent, gender identity. The remainder of this chapter is formed of four sections. The first examines MTF autobiographical representations of the penis and how

¹⁷ Ibid., pp.245-253.

¹⁸ *Richards v USTA* 400 NYS 2d 267 (1977). I cover this case in greater detail in Chapter Six.

¹⁹ In 2003, the UK became the last country in the EU to allow transsexuals to alter their birth certificates and to legally marry, after the European Court of Human Rights found the British government to be in breach of the European Convention on Human Rights for its failure to grant transsexuals full legal recognition their acquired sex and gender. In judgement, the Court wrote that 'it was not convinced that the inability of the transsexual to acquire *all* the biological characteristics took on decisive importance.' The genitals and secondary sex characteristics (breasts, body hair etc.) were enough. See *Goodwin v UK*, ECHR App. 25680/94, (2002).

it was used within these narratives as a sex sign for 'man' and the male body. The second section repeats this analysis with the vagina's role as a signifier of 'woman' and the female body in both MTF and FTM narratives – though here I argue that it is more the lack of a penis than an actual vagina which is represented. In the third section I explore the place of the penis in FTM autobiographies, in the fourth section I explore the technologies of vaginoplasty and phalloplasty and discuss the ways in which the procedures themselves were deployed in both MTF and FTM autobiographies as convincing ways of signifying sex.

The Crux of it All

MTF attitudes towards the penis were diverse, ranging from a mild ambivalence to a visceral loathing. Deirdre McCloskey, the American historian and economist, tells us that Donald, the man she had once been, 'never really loved his penis as some men do'. This is fairly restrained when compared to the invective in British model Caroline Cossey's assertion that 'I displayed no interest in my penis... The idea of actually handling myself repulsed me... I hated to touch my own genitalia.'²⁰ McCloskey had grown up in mid-century Middle America, whilst Cossey had come of age in 1960s England, but whether they hated it or just never really took to it, both women had their penis removed by way of freeing what Cossey called the 'girl trapped inside a male form.'²¹ Of course there were many other signifiers of a 'male form' in twentieth-century Britain and America (broad shoulders, facial hair, height, jaw bone and throat shapes etc.) and courses of female hormones coupled with cosmetic breast surgery usually preceded the removal of the penis in transsexual narratives. Indeed, as we shall see in the next chapter, having breasts and a female-looking face was vital for MTFs hoping to pass as women in public, where proof of castration and penectomy could not always be safely adduced without a charge of indecency. Nevertheless the removal of the penis and subsequent creation of a vagina is always cast as the pivotal moment in the transsexual story. Cossey recalled that 'I had dreamt of this moment for nearly four years. I had saved and planned and prayed to make that dream come true. Now at last I was on my

²⁰ Deidre McCloskey, *Crossing: A Memoir* (Chicago, IL., 1999) p.48; Cossey, *My Story*, pp.11, 25.

²¹ Cossey, *My Story*, p.xi.

way and about to face an experience that I hoped would change my life.²² Even McCloskey, who had said it was a 'myth' that 'the genital operation is the crux of it all' was 'tearful, frantic' at the thought of not being able to have her surgery. She of all people was well aware that for 'being able to say you are complete, really a woman by the no-penis criterion is the most powerful rhetoric for acceptance of behaviour that otherwise does not inspire acceptance' in a society which based sex-distinction on phallogentric principles.²³ Dressing as a woman, having surgically implanted breasts, wearing lipstick, sitting with your legs crossed: none were acceptable behaviour for a man, a penis-person. Thus the no-penis person had to be made. Within this sort of logic, where socially constructed 'natural' gender roles are reified to the point of forcing major surgical and chemical procedures upon the individual, it is small wonder that some feminists have claimed transsexuality as a conservative investment in, or liberal capitulation to, traditional stereotypes of aggressive man and submissive woman.²⁴

This hits at the public/private duality of the penis in MTF transsexual identities. The supposed 'scientific fact' that men have penises (and thus women do not) was a construct of the societies transsexuals lived in, a public discourse which necessarily impinged upon the MTF. Their private convictions of loathing and ambivalence for their penis, their personal beliefs that it signified that their bodies were wrong for their gender, were an interaction with that public discourse and one which was obligated to describe itself with publicly acknowledged terms and ideas. The British travel writer, Jan Morris, for example, wondered if 'society had allowed me to live in the gender role I preferred, would I have bothered to change sex?'²⁵ The central mechanism of transsexuality is to mould the body to fit the mind, to make the bodily sex fit the psychological gender. But as elucidated in transsexual autobiography this fails to mention that those newly-engineered bodies must also fit into a public expectancy of what a certain sex of body should look like. Otherwise the MTF herself, bound as she would be into the shared discourses of her socio-cultural environment, would not then be able

²² Ibid., p.94.

²³ McCloskey, *Crossing* pp.193, 190.

²⁴ Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety*, (London, 1992), pp.93-117; Bernice Hausman, *Changing Sex: Transsexualism, Technology and the Idea of Gender*, (Durham, NC., 1995), p.138; Sander L. Gilman, *Making the Body Beautiful: a Cultural History of Aesthetic Surgery*, (Princeton, NJ., 1999), p.269.

²⁵ Morris, *Conundrum*, p.146.

to say she had matched her body to her mind for she would not have the requisite language to do so. These discourses, as we shall see, remained remarkably static over the years of the second half of the twentieth century. Considering the vast tumult in the rest of the social-sexual order that characterised the period, it surely speaks to the pervasive influence of phallogocentric ways of thinking that the penis seemed in some ways to 'escape' history – that is, to maintain a constant, near-changeless significance. This shared discourse of the 'scientific fact' pervades MTF autobiography, and never more obviously than when an attempt is made to hide the penis away – figuratively and literally.

When Jan Morris considered the origins of her transsexuality she thought the idea of her penis having anything to do with it was ridiculous. That the problem 'actually emanated from my sexual organs did not cross my mind then (in childhood) and it seems unlikely to me even now... that my conundrum might simply be a matter of penis or vagina, testicle or womb seems to me a contradiction in terms, for it concerned not my apparatus, but my *self*.'²⁶ Morris's penis is mostly removed from analytic sight in her autobiography which, as historian Bernice Hausman describes it, is 'transsexualism as a disorder of gender identity spun out in dazzling detail.'²⁷ It is imperative to Morris's narrative that the body is cast as something rather profane and even a little gauche, especially when contrasted to the 'essentialness of oneself' which was her gender.²⁸ Without this hierarchisation, and its manifestation in a dismissed penis, Morris' rhetorical strategy would have failed. As I show below in Chapter Four, Morris invests heavily in the gendered discourses of the day and thus, as McCloskey would suggest twenty-five years later, her castration and penectomy serves as an explanation of this behaviour, otherwise unacceptable in a person with a penis. Indeed for Morris this cultural demand is turned into a quasi-spiritual metamorphosis. She asserts always feeling and often acting 'like a woman' but confesses after her operation that 'the removal of the organs themselves has contributed, for there was to the presence of the penis something positive and stimulating. My body was made to push and initiate, it is now made to yield and

²⁶ Morris, *Conundrum*, p.17.

²⁷ Hausman, *Changing Sex*, p.162.

²⁸ Morris, *Conundrum*, p.20.

accept, and the outside change has had its inner consequences.²⁹ Without a penis, Morris's passive, feminine behaviour became publicly understandable and thus acceptable.

McCloskey, too, suggests that the removal of her penis was 'important but not defining' and that 'it was living as a woman' which really mattered to her. But, as I have noted it was she, the Chicago school economist who best knew the public value of a penis. 'Men,' she wrote in despair at the behaviour of male academics at conferences, 'were always pushing forward their Things.'³⁰ Her knowing capitalisation here references the Phallus, the public, symbolic penis and was her way of mocking the traditional link between male genitalia and male social power. Yet she also accessed the register of aggression and activity, of pushing, which recalls Morris's thoughts on the penis. For McCloskey, as we see below in Chapter Four, living as a woman was a matter of kindness and gift-giving, of crying and remembering birthdays. Yet each of these things, taught to her by other women showing 'this is how we live' is given discursive weight by her acknowledgment of the penis's social power. Without the acknowledgment that assertive, aggressive behaviour is expected of people with a penis, her insistence on removing it because she *wasn't* aggressive and assertive would have made no sense.³¹

Even before having their penectomies and castrations, some MTFs had to work to conceal their penis from public view. There is an element of wry humour to accounts of such strategies, mostly stemming from the question McCloskey asked: 'how many times a day do people check your genitals?'³² For despite the fundamental place of the penis in sex

²⁹ Ibid., p.133.

³⁰ McCloskey, *Crossing*, p.189.

³¹ Much recent work on the history of masculinity has pointed towards the connection between manhood (identity-as-a-man) and assertion/strength (economic and physical). See: John Tosh, 'What Should Historians Do With Masculinity? Reflections on Nineteenth-Century Britain', *History Workshop Journal*, 38 (1994), pp.179-202; J. Tosh & Michael Roper (eds), *Manful Assertions: Masculinities in Britain Since 1800* (London, 1991); E. Anthony Rotundo, *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era* (New York, NY., 1993); Leslie Hall, *Hidden Anxieties: Male Sexuality, 1900-1950* (Cambridge, 1991). Abigail Wills has argued, in the English post-war context, for a 'softening' of the usual boundaries of masculinity, linked to the collapse of the holistic vision of society. This softening seems not to have much impinged upon transsexual autobiographers. Abigail Wills, 'Delinquency, Masculinity, and Citizenship in England, 1950-1970', *Past and Present* 187 (May, 2005), p.160.

³² McCloskey, *Crossing*, p.190.

distinction as understood in transsexual discourse, it tended to be secondary sex characteristics which on a day-to-day level were more useful in being able to pass. 'Your face, yes, your gestures, voice. But what's between the legs is seldom tested'.³³ The importance of these secondary signifiers is the theme of the next chapter, where I will show how they themselves are tied up in phallogentric conventions on what a person with a penis should look like – much as McCloskey's and Morris's gendered actions were endorsed by their surgeries. There were some situations, however, in which some MTFs found themselves which gave other people ample opportunities to check their genitals. A number of MTFs who wrote autobiographies were at some point in their lives in the entertainment business, often as dancers, showgirls or strippers; professions in which the penis really did not have a place. Caroline Cossey, who transitioned in the early 1970s, had breasts (albeit 'nowhere near large enough to impress an audience'), shaved her legs, wore her auburn hair long and was considered pretty enough to be offered a job as a showgirl in a London strip joint. However, Cossey still had her male genitalia, a state of affairs which made her small breasts 'the least of my problems'.³⁴ For her act she was to wear 'miniscule red bikini pants,' which begged the question: 'how was I to conceal my penis?'³⁵ She hit upon a strategy common to many MTFs:

'It involved sticking plaster. I would tuck my penis back between my legs and tape it flat. Effective but excruciating! The sticking plaster would leave sores on my skin, and every night I would have to lay in the bath soaking it off. It also made urination an impossibility during the show. If I drank too much before curtain up I was in big trouble!'³⁶

Renée Richards, the American ophthalmologist and sometime professional tennis player, came to much the same arrangement prior to her surgeries. She would tie a piece of fishing twine around her penis, pull it back between 'the cheeks of my ass... Then I would pull the

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Cossey, *My Story*, p.40.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

string taut causing my penis to be stretched brutally around the curve of my torso.³⁷ Richards was not a stripper, but her narrative twins with Cossey's in pushing to the fore the very great pain which preoperative MTFs put themselves through to avoid genital distinction. There was Jan Morris admitting that had she not been able to find a surgeon she would have taken a knife and done it herself and Aleshia Brevard – working as a showgirl in early 1960s California – actually cutting off her own testicles in the knowledge that 'with serious enough mutilation, doctors would be duty-bound to correct the damage' and remove the penis also, thus preparing her for vaginoplastic surgery.³⁸ It was incidents of genital distinction which convinced April Ashley, working as a stripper and dancer in 1950s Paris, that she would eventually have to seek out a surgeon who would cut off her penis. It was especially difficult when she and her MTF friends went sunbathing and 'wore bikinis... (people) would point at our knickers and say "where is it?" and we would have to bombard them with the contents of our picnic lunch.'³⁹

All of these vignettes have at their heart a fear of absolute exposure. Unlike secondary sex characteristics (hair, height, body shape) and gender signs (how you walk, talk, sit, dress), genital distinction is solidly binary.⁴⁰ Many non-transsexual women have facial hair, many non-transsexual men do not have broad shoulders or big muscles, but they either have a penis or they do not. Caroline Cossey ran up against this absolute distinction when she took a date home to her apartment in London. They did not have sex, but kissed and fell asleep together on the couch. When she woke up, he had gone. 'The blanket was on the floor and I realised immediately what had happened – he had undone it in the night and discovered the truth.'⁴¹ The truth. Not 'my penis' but 'the truth', a reification of the genital distinction, of the 'scientific fact' which makes manifest the phallogocentric centrality of the penis

³⁷ Renée Richards with Jack Ames, *Second Serve: the Renée Richards Story* (New York, NY, 1983), p.57.

³⁸ Morris, *Conundrum*, p.143; Brevard, *The Woman I Was Not Born to Be*, p.10.

³⁹ April Ashley with Duncan Fallowell, *April Ashley's Odyssey* (London, 1982), p.63.

⁴⁰ This solidity might seem to collapse before the phenomenon of intersexuality but, as both Bernice Hausman and the biologist Anne Fausto-Sterling have pointed out, the medical management of intersexuality is focused almost entirely upon maintaining this simple genital division. See Hausman, *Changing Sex*, pp.72-109; Anne Fausto-Sterling, *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality*, (New York, 2000), pp.45-77. See also Suzanne J. Kessler, *Lessons From the Intersexed* (New Brunswick, NJ., 1998), pp.12-32.

⁴¹ Cossey, *My Story*, p.45.

to MTF transsexual identities. What Cossey encountered there in her living room was, in the words of Robert Stoller, the pre-eminent sex psychologist of the 1960s and 1970s, the significant power of 'the outstanding insignia of maleness.'⁴²

Stoller was, as Marjorie Garber has suggested, 'the most frequently cited of gender identity specialists.' Indeed he perhaps wrote more than any other medical professional on the psychology of transsexuality and gender.⁴³ His canonical book *Sex and Gender* (1968) features a broad spectrum of transsexual case studies from which he concluded that the MTF 'by ridding himself of his penis... removes the outstanding insignia of his maleness.'⁴⁴ In many ways, this can be taken as an affirmation of the centrality of the penis in transsexual identities. Earlier in *Sex and Gender*, though, he qualified this, demurring that 'although the penis contributes to the sense of maleness it is not essential.'⁴⁵ It was possible, Stoller seemed to be saying, for the penis to be both outstanding and inessential to MTF identities. His was a deliberately contradictory point which I believe was born out of the necessity of deprivileging the body (the sex) in favour of the mind (the gender) in transsexual discourse. The MTF had to deny the role of the body in effecting gender identity – as Jan Morris and Deirdre McCloskey did – in order to rationalize a plastic change to that body. *Simultaneously*, they were bound to highlight the pain caused to them by that body, both in their own eyes, and from the eyes of a public which assumed it to contain a congruently gendered person within. It is this narrative balancing act which Garber misses in her assessment of Stoller's work. Garber suggests that there is an 'obsessive concern' with the penis in MTFs; a point I would hardly have got this far without agreeing with. She insists then, however, that this is grounded in 'the conviction that masculine identity, male subjectivity, is *determined* and signified by the penis.'⁴⁶ She cites Stoller himself on the MTF transsexual's relationship to the penis: 'it is what causes him despair... the more excited the organ is, the more his need to be

⁴² Robert Stoller, *Sex and Gender: On the Development of Masculinity and Femininity* (London, 1968), p.187.

⁴³ Garber, *Vested Interests*, p.96. Harry Benjamin, author of *The Transsexual Phenomenon*, (New York, NY., 1966), was the pre-eminent medical scholar of transsexuality throughout the period, but his work focused almost exclusively on treatment. Stoller's work was concerned with transsexuality as a counter-example of gender development and thus explored the psychological and pathological ideas far more fully.

⁴⁴ Stoller, *Sex and Gender*, p.187.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p.39.

⁴⁶ Garber, *Vested Interests*, p.97. My italics.

rid of it.⁴⁷ Garber is making a descriptive leap here, from the penis's *signification* of maleness, clearly seen in Stoller's text, to its *determination* of it, which is not. It was the penis's possible public signification of maleness which caused the MTF transsexual her despair. The penis cannot determine her maleness because, as Jan Morris asserted, her 'essentialness' was 'woman', totally and completely. Even the supposedly mighty phallus could not determine something that was not there to be determined in the first place. But it *could* mistakenly signify something that was not there. A mis-read sex sign. It was the penis's power to confuse, to say 'here is a man' when the owner considered herself a woman, which lay behind Cossey and company's fear of genital exposure.

Stoller's myriad discussions of the development of gender identity in children helped to establish the primacy of gender (the mind) over sex (the body) in transsexual (and medical) discourse. The genitalia were not for Stoller the causes of gender difference, but the *insignia* of it. For example, he undermined the importance of somatic difference (and the Freudian theories which rest upon it) to very young children: 'From observing little girls – and I cannot believe you have not seen the same – they show definite signs of femininity long before the phallic and oedipal phases... penis envy and castration complex (become) only one aspect of (gender) development rather than the origin of it.'⁴⁸ The child looks for the right genitalia to fit their gender identity, Stoller said, and usually finds them. It was when there existed an incongruity (when a female-identifying child found she had a penis, in this case) that the transsexual condition arose. Thus the 'need to be rid of it' which Garber cites, and which all the MTF transsexual autobiographies highlight to some degree or other, only comes into existence because it is preceded by a conviction, stemming from a feminine gender identity, that it should not be there. This feeling is of course rooted in the wider socio-cultural 'scientific fact' and it manifests with some regularity in the transsexual autobiographies. This went beyond the occasionally mutilative fantasies I have already mentioned and shaded instead into a sense of estrangement, a complete disassociation from the outstanding insignia. April Ashley wrote that 'my male genitals were quite alien to me' and during her divorce/annulment trial in 1970, she was deliberately dismissive of them, saying how they had 'always been

⁴⁷ Ibid., Stoller, *Sex and Gender*, p.188.

⁴⁸ Stoller, *Sex and Gender*, p.60.

meagre' and of little interest to her.⁴⁹ Caroline Cossey could not bring herself to touch hers and Deirdre McCloskey wrote that she pitied the 'poor thing', just before the operation that would slice it off forever.⁵⁰ Indeed, for McCloskey the operation was akin to the 'removal of a malignant tumour, not the removal of a functioning leg.' It was the removal of something which Donald, the man she had once been, 'had never loved the way some men do.'⁵¹ Her cancerous metaphor points up the vital privileging of gender over sex in transsexual discourse. Not liking your penis did not make you a woman, it was feeling like a woman that made you not like your penis, that potentially public sign of maleness, of 'man'. Desperate to impress this upon her reader McCloskey reverted to sympathetic fantasy suggesting that 'any woman who looked down to find she had a penis would have the same impulse as the transsexual: You get (it) cut off just as quickly as you could, yes?'⁵² Yet the impulse does not end there. Although most MTF transsexual accounts of the penis focus on its removal they do eventually have to come around to its replacement.

The Reverse of the Visible

The vagina, as I have said, takes a distinctly secondary role in MTF narratives. Whereas negative feelings for the penis are set out in disgusted detail, any desire to actually *have* female genitalia is strangely absent or at least never enunciated. Again and again the eventual surgical creation of a vagina is portrayed simply as a function, an inevitable result, of the removal of the penis. For example, Caroline Cossey wrote after her operation that she was 'tremendously relieved to be free of a part of my body which had caused me such anguish. But I didn't feel more "female" because I'd had a "vagina" created for me.' Her vagina was a distinct afterthought to her penectomy.⁵³ As though born of the pages of Luce Irigaray's harshest critiques of phallogentrism, the MTF vagina can often seem no more than the negative, the lack of, the 'reverse of the only visible and morphologically designatable organ.'⁵⁴ Many studies of transsexuality have constructed the phenomenon as wholly invested in a stable 'sex/gender system' which, as Irigaray insists, is itself based on the

⁴⁹ Ashley, *Odyssey*, pp.75, 218. See also *Corbett v. Corbett*, para. 36.

⁵⁰ Cossey, *My Story*, pp.11, 25, 48; McCloskey, *Crossing*, p.196.

⁵¹ McCloskey, *Crossing*, pp.189, 188.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p.198.

⁵³ Cossey, *My Story*, p.103.

⁵⁴ Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One*, p.26.

notion that woman is the negative of man. Bernice Hausman, for example, has argued that the stable male/female gender system is the very goal of transsexuality; being both its *raison d'être* and its operative principle. On the other hand, Joanne Meyerowitz has counselled against investing transsexuals themselves with such 'transhistoric symbolic weight' when they are in fact just individuals seeking to resolve a particularly tricky 'personal problem' with the 'languages and cultural forms available to them.'⁵⁵ Even so, the very fact that such 'personal problems' needs must be enunciated via cultural forms prevents them being entirely personal and private. It was the public languages of sex difference, of 'man' and 'woman' which allowed transsexuals to express their desires, to make sense of them to others. We can see this in April Ashley's recollections of her pre-operative life. For years she had refused to let anyone touch her genitalia and now 'the elimination of these organs became essential to my finding life tolerable. It wasn't a matter of: wouldn't it be fun to have a vagina?... because transsexual surgery is no joke.'⁵⁶ The hierarchy of import is clear in Ashley's autobiography: get rid of the penis *then* create a vagina. Hausman, who writes lucidly of the resistance of the material body to such 'ideological captation' as this, would perhaps point out that, no matter what discursive context an MTF transsexual wrote in, the corporeal reality of the body itself would force this prioritisation. However, in story-telling terms it would have been possible to express a *desire* for a vagina and *then* a wish to be rid of the penis, but in none of the autobiographies is this to be seen. Caroline Cossey, having spent so much of her autobiography being revolted by her male genitalia, and never once wishing she had a vagina – except in the textually suppressed longings made legible only by her attempts to appear without penis – suddenly found her penis to be of vital usefulness to her on the path to gaining a woman's body. She recorded her doctor (an anonymous "Dr P" at the Charing Cross clinic in London) as saying; "Well, you appear to have plenty of penile and scrotal skin. I see no reason why your surgery should not be successful."⁵⁷ This is not so much the materiality of the body resisting ideological captation, but mirroring a dominant discourse, for the technology of vaginoplasty, as it was developed in the second half of the twentieth century, was predicated upon the simple and ancient idea of an inverted penis.

⁵⁵ Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed*, p.12.

⁵⁶ Ashley, *Odyssey*, p.75.

⁵⁷ Cossey, *My Story*, p.91.

The basic surgical procedure for turning a person with a penis into a person with a vagina called (and continues to call) first of all for the splitting of the penis and the removal of the testicles from the scrotum. The inner parts of the penile shaft are then scraped out, leaving only the skin and the head (the nerve endings of which are kept connected). The skin is then tucked back into the abdomen and the head is used to fashion a clitoris. The remaining scrotal skin is then sewn around the inverted penis to form labia. The cosmetic results of vaginoplasty have always been remarkably good – certainly in comparison to the phalloplastic operation. Even so, it is hard not to borrow from Irigaray to describe the procedure as operating on a principle by which ‘women’s genitals are simply absent, masked, tucked back up inside their “crack”’.⁵⁸ It is in this way that transsexuality might be seen as problematic for the ‘two-sex’ principle as established by Thomas Laqueur in *Making Sex* (1991), for in vaginoplasty we can perhaps see a fairly clear representation of a sixteenth-century genital sex-distinction system in which woman is man turned outside in.⁵⁹ It would, though, I think be erroneous to suggest that this was a conscious strategy on the part of either the surgeons or the transsexuals. It could, *pace* Hausman, be merely a manifestation of the limits of the human body or, *pace* Meyerowitz, be the only strategy possible to solve a painful problem. Indeed, pain is inescapably connected to the neo-vagina in MTF narratives, to the point at which even the penis is entirely forgotten.

The agony of vaginoplasty manifests itself in the autobiographies in a variety of ways. As usual, Jan Morris was rather restrained, writing only of remembering her days in the Casablanca sex-change clinic with an ‘affectionate lack of clarity’ due to the anaesthetics she was given to deaden what she called the ‘cruel pain’ of her surgery.⁶⁰ The two British showgirls, Cossey and Ashley, were far more forthcoming in their graphic descriptions of post-operative agony, screaming for drugs only to be either denied them or to discover that ‘tablets cannot touch pain at this level.’⁶¹ Their pain stemmed not just from the operation itself

⁵⁸ Irigaray, ‘This Sex Which is Not One’ in id., *This Sex Which is Not One*, p.26.

⁵⁹ Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, MA., 1991), pp.70-98.

⁶⁰ Morris, *Conundrum*, pp.123,124.

⁶¹ Cossey, *My Story*, p.99; Ashley, *Odyssey*, p.88.

but also from the aftercare procedures necessary to maintain the newly created vagina as a viable space. Ashley, for example, had to have a 'speculum inserted... to prevent the vagina from closing up and to guarantee the smooth healing of the vaginal walls which are heavily clotted with blood while the blood vessels realign themselves.'⁶² Cossey, in contrast, was given a somewhat less scientific piece of equipment with which to do this job: 'a sort of dildo... (the surgeon said) "This is to keep your vagina dilated... I know it seems rather unnatural, but you need to insert it a few times every day. It may cause you a great deal of discomfort at first.'⁶³

Discomfort, though, and pain especially, have an unusual place in theoretical conceptions of subjectivity. Whilst it is often pain that Enlightenment-progressive political systems have aimed to eliminate from individual experience (the pursuit of happiness, the end of alienation, freedom from molestation etc.), Elaine Scarry has suggested that even within such discourses being in pain is as close as one can ever come to being certain of one's existence. Pain, Scarry posits, turns the individual *in* on themselves in a way that no other phenomenon is able to. Within conceptions of subjectivity that ground themselves (explicitly or otherwise) in the idea of a fractured subject who is dependent upon other (and Other) fractured subjects for a sense of identity it is only physical pain that isolates *inside* the individual a sense of another *outside* force.⁶⁴ There is a sense of this not merely in Ashley's assertion that alongside the pain she was 'pitifully grateful too. Elated, completed at last...' but in Deidre McCloskey's entire post-operative tale.⁶⁵ McCloskey, accessing the register of 'secular stoicism' which sustained her throughout much of her 'Crossing', downplayed her discomfort. She wrote that 'the event was a success, though I'm still sore. No great pain. But my digestive system took a week to start up again, so I had some sick, sick days in the hospital, retching up violently. I'm still a little feeble.'⁶⁶ McCloskey plays with this feebleness in her account, using it to establish herself as a woman, both in terms of genital sex signs and in terms of feminine socialisation:

⁶² Ashley, *Odyssey*, p.88.

⁶³ Cossey, *My Story*, p.101.

⁶⁴ Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: the Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford, 1985).

⁶⁵ Ashley, *Odyssey*, p.89

⁶⁶ McCloskey, *Crossing*, p.199.

After two and a half weeks of what I took to labelling to women friends as "the mother of all periods", during which the neo-vagina excreted like mad, it calmed down some. I'll need to wear a small pad indefinitely, no hardship... I have to dilate daily for a few months. This is not something you look forward to, although it's not agonizing, either.

The idea is to stretch the vagina and keep it open... Then sexual intercourse or dilation two or three times a week will do it. The chore takes about half an hour. Though it's now the most advanced use of my equipment, it hurts too much now to be pleasurable.⁶⁷

It would be easy enough to dismiss McCloskey's co-option of 'women's pain' as just one more phallographic appropriation of female experience, a forced entry into 'the few private spaces women may enjoy' which shouts down any objections with the very certainty of pain and thus a particular (gendered) subjectivity.⁶⁸ But it may also be that this was an honest attempt to enunciate a sense of femaleness beyond a simple negative of the 'scientific fact', one in which the pain eventually subsided to be replaced by an awareness of the vagina in and of itself. McCloskey, surely unknowingly, seems here to be echoing Luce Irigaray; trying to write into existence her own female subjectivity in which 'woman touches herself all the time and no-one can forbid her to do so, for her genitals are formed of two lips in continuous contact.'⁶⁹ No need now for a penis to either penetrate or to act as the sex which actually is one, for there in the vagina, in the labia, rests a metaphor for the active subjectivities (rather than passive objects of phallic discourse) available to woman.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Germaine Greer, *The Whole Woman* (London, 2000) p.93. Greer argues that there is a biological 'bedrock' to femininity, a position which ignores much recent work on the historical contingency and social construction of biological sex difference. See for example, Nelly Oudshorn, *Beyond the Natural Body: an Archaeology of Sex Hormones*, (London, 1994); Londa Schiebinger, *The Mind Has No Sex? Women in the Origins of Modern Science*, (Cambridge, MA., 1989); id., *Nature's Body: Sexual Politics and the Making of Modern Science*, (London, 1994); Joan Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference in the Middle Ages: Medicine, Science and Culture*, (Cambridge, 1993).

⁶⁹ Irigaray, 'This Sex Which is Not One' in id., *This Sex Which is Not One*, p.24.

But McCloskey's undermining of the penis rather stands alone amongst MTF accounts of the vagina. Even she is relieved finally to be told 'You have enough depth' by her doctor. Enough depth for what? one might wonder, but only if unfamiliar with the genre as a whole. The vagina was considered, as Masters and Johnson wrote in 1966, 'a clinically potential space, rather than an actual one.'⁷⁰ It is waiting, as Hausman garners from the medical literature, to measure its success by its 'ability to engage in penile-vaginal intercourse.'⁷¹ Caroline Cossey insisted that being able to have heterosexual intercourse with man didn't make her more of a woman – for she had always felt herself to be a woman – but the operation gave her the chance to 'function' in a relationship and to 'live a more normal life with a man.'⁷² April Ashley's narrative went even further than this in revealing just how dependent on the penis her new vagina really was. Thanking the first man who had sex with her after the operation, she wrote, 'Wherever you are, dear Skippy, many dear kisses for being so kind on that miraculous night and helping me on the road to womanhood.'⁷³ Simply having a vagina seems not to have been enough to bring Ashley into what she considered a truly female persona. It had to be penetrated by a penis, too. She was never more deliriously complete in her gendered sense of self than when she later slept with her boyfriend Joey, whom 'Mother Nature had equipped... magnificently for love, and I felt it fully for the first time.'⁷⁴ The mechanics of heterosexuality and their impact on transsexual subjectivities are discussed more fully in Chapter Three. For now, though, it is perhaps enough to note that both Ashley and the American, Aleshia Brevard, record making pre-operative promises to boyfriends that they would undergo the sex-change procedure for them, so that they could love them as real women.⁷⁵ For all this negativity, at least the vagina got a mention in MTF autobiographies. In narratives of female-to-male sex change it was once again the penis which dominated, and the vagina relegated from best supporting actress to a wholly silent partner.

⁷⁰ Masters & Johnson, *Human Sexual Response*, p.104.

⁷¹ Bernice Hausman calls this, 'of course, a decidedly phallogocentric measure of success.' Hausman, *Changing Sex* p.69. See also William Walters, Trudy Kennedy & Michael Ross, 'Results of Gender Reassignment' in Walters & Ross (eds), *Transsexualism and Sex Reassignment*, (Oxford, 1986) pp.146-151.

⁷² Cossey, *My Story*, p.103.

⁷³ Ashley, *Odyssey* p.94.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p.98.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p.55; Brevard, *The Woman I Was Not Born to Be*, pp.64-80.

The Outward Acknowledgement

You would be forgiven, reading Mario Martino's autobiography, *Emergence* (1974), for thinking that he had never had a vagina at all. Indeed, you would have to read between the lines and assume that, when he was still living as a woman and attempted to have heterosexual sex with a man, he was in possession of a fully functioning set of female genitalia.⁷⁶ But you would never find this admission set down plainly in the text. It is the penis – or at least his desire for one – which dominates Martino's narrative and those of most other FTMs who recorded their life story in the twentieth century. This phallocentrism obviously differed to that seen in MTF autobiographies in that it was a quest to possess rather than divest. What for Jan Morris, Deirdre McCloskey *et al* was something that incorrectly marked them out as men, became for FTMs precisely the opposite: a male-marker that they desired yet lacked. The FTM tale does not however operate as a female body analogue to its MTF counterpart: where the penis is variously hated or disliked in the latter, the former express little or no feelings towards the vagina. The penis is the only star of FTM narratives, but this time in a romantic comedy as opposed to a slasher flick. Martino expressed this love by writing that having a penis would be 'the realisation of a dream' and by exclaiming 'Yes! Yes!' to inquiries about whether having a penis could compensate for the incredible pain of phalloplasty.⁷⁷ Yet this wish was frequently tempered by the functional realities of plastic surgery in the second half of the twentieth century. The limits of technology, finance and aesthetics prevented many FTMs from achieving their genital goal. Later in the 1980s, Mark Rees, an English FTM, recalled driving up and down the country from his Tunbridge Wells home to his Newcastle clinic in the vain hope of being able to undergo experimental phalloplastic surgery. Like a spurned lover, driven to delusion by his need, Rees pursued his penis, 'hoping that something might be possible' despite the surgical improbabilities.⁷⁸ Even in the middle of the 1990s, Paul Hewitt, living alone in the Reading and recording his physical transformation towards a male body, knew that he would probably have to do without the penis he had always wanted so much. Not only was the technology seriously unreliable (and

⁷⁶ Mario Martino, *Emergence: a Transsexual Autobiography*, (New York, 1977), pp.109-110.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p.257.

⁷⁸ Mark Rees, *Dear Sir or Madam? The Autobiography of a Female-to-Male Transsexual* (London, 1996), p.147.

he went into graphic detail), but it was also 'very expensive and I doubt there is such a thing as a free willy on the NHS! If word got out, everyone would want one.'⁷⁹ This is a romantic comedy, remember...

Why then this desire for the penis, even when it was so difficult to get hold of? What was so important to FTM transsexuals about what Masters and Johnson called 'the male's primary reproductive viscera' when transsexuality based itself so much on internal gender identities?⁸⁰ Hewitt, himself well-read in previous transsexual autobiographies, gave this rather blunt explanation: 'It is true that having a penis does not make you a man, but it is bollocks to disregard its significance or importance to self-esteem. My heart is permanently broken because I haven't got one.'⁸¹ The issue of self-esteem is connected to that 'scientific fact' once again, for it is a question of attribution. Having a penis may not indeed make you masculine or manly or prone to acting as society would expect a man to act, but *being* masculine, manly and acting like a man encourages society to *assume* the presence of a penis. Mark Rees, for example, set his previously uncertain heart on phalloplasty after one too many potentially embarrassing incidents sharing holiday bedrooms with other men. Deciding which toilet to use made him 'long for surgery which would, I thought, remove such problems.'⁸² This threat of discovery permeates the FTM narrative in a subtly different way to the manifestation of incorrect attribution in MTF stories. Whereas for Caroline Cossey it was her date seeing her penis that made him think she was a man, Rees worried that his holidaying friend would see that he *didn't* have a penis and thus assume he was a woman. Conversely, she does not worry about her lack of a vagina, nor does he worry about having one. Once more the circular logic of phallocentrism is brought into play: penis = man, no penis = not a man, not a man = woman. The FTM sense of self-as-male depends, in the same way as the MTF sense of self-as-female does, upon an authorisation in phallogentric public language, in a discourse which connotes 'man' with 'penis'.

⁷⁹ Hewitt, *A Self-Made Man*, p.20.

⁸⁰ Masters & Johnson, *Human Sexual Response*, p.177.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p.70.

⁸² Rees, *Dear Sir or Madam?*, p.122.

This public discourse about private parts often manifests in FTM stories as a fantasy penis. Paul Hewitt wrote that 'in my mind I have one, but it's a shame Big Jack is invisible.'⁸³ The joke was there to assuage his 'huge disappointment' that 'I will probably never own a male organ' but only made sense because it was legitimated by a socio-cultural assumption that, with his masculine gender roles and traits, he really ought to have one.⁸⁴ To Mario Martino finally getting his phalloplasty was for him the 'realisation of a dream.' His surgically-formed penis was a 'new part of me – a part I have always conceived of myself as possessing. It completes outwardly a picture which I have always carried in my head.'⁸⁵ The important note in Martino's fantasy-enactment is that idea of interiority becoming exteriority.⁸⁶ In this his penis served as an engagement with public expectations of how a manly-acting body should look. The picture he had always carried in his head was not purely his own picture, but a shared one in which a common language allowed him to believe. Not always being able to engage in this conversation caused anxiety for some, as Mark Rees admitted: 'Generally, I think we female-to-males find it hard to feel totally secure in the male role without the right "bits.."⁸⁷ The manifestations of these insecurities – whilst urinating, trying on clothes, having sex, buying domestic appliances – are, as with the mechanics of MTF heterosexuality, subjects for further discussion in Chapter Four. What concerns us here are the obstacles to security, the failures of phalloplasty.

The Suitcase Handle

For sheer eye-watering agony in the historical archive you would be hard pressed to find something that elicited more sympathetically crossed legs than Mario Martino's account of his first couple of attempts at phalloplasty in the early and mid- 1970s. The problem for Martino, as with many others, lay in the limits of the technique used to create the neo-penis: the pedicle flap. The first artificial penis is generally considered to have been constructed by the eminent British surgeon Sir Harold Gilles in 1917, although it has been suggested that a Russian urologist named Filatov may have beaten him to it by a year or so. Either way, both

⁸³ Hewitt, *A Self-Made Man*, p.60.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Martino, *Emergence*, p.262.

⁸⁶ Carolyn Steedman, *Strange Dislocations: Childhood and the Idea of Human Interiority*, (London, 1995), *passim*.

⁸⁷ Rees, *Dear Sir or Madam*, p175.

men's pioneering work was engendered by the terrible physical mutilations of trench battles in the Great War and both made use of the pedicle flap.⁸⁸ This ingenious plastic surgery involves the transplant of skin and subcutaneous tissue from one part of the body to another – one end of the 'flap' of skin is only detached from the original site when the other has been 'pedicled' (that is, walked) to the new site and safely established. In phalloplasty the original flap is taken from the abdomen or the inner thigh. It is then rolled into a tubular shape to make the semblance of a penis and attached to the urethra of the patient. In theory the pedicling allows for blood to continue to flow through the tube-flap, maintaining a healthy integrity to the patient's body. In theory. Looking down at his soon-to-be attached penis, Martino did not like what he saw. 'The tube was shrivelling', he wrote as he watched the blood cease flowing into the flap of flesh cut and rolled by the surgeons for transplant. It was 'curling in on itself like a small snail' and he was understandably dismayed. 'Instead of the handsome phallus I had expected to grow on my thigh for later relocation, I had a disintegrating suitcase handle.'⁸⁹ The black humour of this Romantic Comedy would serve him well, for if the first operation went wrong, at least it went wrong fairly early on. Such could not be said for the next attempt. Although this time the rolled flap was both 'handsome' and phallic and was finally pedicled up to the groin, practice failed once again to follow theory. 'The blood supply was not sufficient to reach the tip of the penis, (and) within the week after the trip (to hospital) most of the area turned dark, signifying death of the tissue.'⁹⁰ The extreme FTM desire for a penis shows up in his ensuing attempts to remedy the situation, firstly scalding-hot baths, but even these 'would not save most of the head turning black and foul-smelling. So I sat nightly in the tub and, very slowly, cut away the dead tissue.' As he joked, 'Talk about a castration complex!'⁹¹

Martino's necrotising penis was by no means an unfortunate anomaly. Indeed, the problems associated with phalloplasty were well documented in some of the earliest medical publications on transsexuality. John Hoopes, a surgeon at the Johns Hopkins University

⁸⁸ For a different perspective on the mutilations of the Great War and their impact upon masculinities, see Joanna Bourke, *Dismembering the Male: Men's Bodies, Britain, and the Great War* (Chicago, 1997).

⁸⁹ Martino, *Emergence*, p.259.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.262.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

hospital, wrote in 1969 that 'creation of the male external genitourinary apparatus is not accomplished easily and is fraught with rather serious hazards.'⁹² Harry Benjamin, too, noted in his *Transsexual Phenomenon* (1966) that genital reconstruction for FTMs was extremely difficult and not to be undertaken lightly – if at all.⁹³ The situation altered little in the next decades. Leslie Lothstein, a psychiatrist at the Case Western Reserve University Gender Identity Clinic, wrote in 1983 that 'in spite of various claims for surgical success, few, if any, surgeons can construct a phallus that is aesthetically and functionally acceptable.' Of the complaints made by post-operative FTMs about their neo-phalluses, Lothstein listed terrible scarring, the small size of the organ, urinary difficulties and the impossibility of erection without the 'insertion of a rod.'⁹⁴ Lothstein's assessment still held true in the early 1990s, when Paul Hewitt considered his genital problems. 'Plastic surgery to construct an artificial penis,' he wrote, 'is also an option. But I am Undecided of Reading about whether I would trust a surgeon with such sensitive regions of my anatomy.'⁹⁵ His unease stemmed from his understanding of phalloplasty as 'something of an imprecise art.'⁹⁶ He had heard enough of the 'nitty gritty' of the procedure to be comically 'revolted' and left wondering whether it would leave him as 'the six million dollar-man or Frankenstein's monster?'⁹⁷ Mark Rees, too, knew of the dangers of penile surgery and listed them in detail as a way to 'rationalize myself out of the desire for phalloplasty.'⁹⁸ In fact, problems surrounding the procedure allowed Rees to reinforce the transsexual discourse of gender's superiority over sex. Referring to the unattractive appearance and sexual uselessness of the neo-phallus, he mocked the idea that 'my whole identity depends on the presence of a few inches of probably numb and non-functional flesh.'⁹⁹ He admitted that 'were the surgery safe, and the constructed phallus sensitive, aesthetically pleasing and functional, then it would be a different matter,' but

⁹² John Hoopes, 'Operative Treatment of the Female Transsexual', in Richard Green & John Money (eds), *Transsexualism and Sex Reassignment* (Baltimore, MD., 1969), p.345.

⁹³ Benjamin, *The Transsexual Phenomenon*, p.73.

⁹⁴ Leslie Martin Lothstein, *Female-to-Male Transsexualism: Historical, Clinical and Theoretical Issues* (London, 1983) p.299.

⁹⁵ Hewitt, *A Self-Made Man*, p.20. Hewitt's autobiography was published in 1994, but the diaries contained within it are from 1991.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.71.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.72.

⁹⁸ Rees, *Dear Sir or Madam?* p.149.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

acknowledged the wisdom of accepting the limits of medical science.¹⁰⁰ The narratives reveal an intense desire for a penis, but also an awareness both of what could be achieved versus what needed to be achieved for engagement in public discourse. A botched plastic penis would have signified a failed attempt to change the body, which would in itself have revealed the original female sex. This revelation would then have led to the incorrect public assumptions of a female gender identity within – something FTMs sought always to avoid. As Paul Hewitt surmised the frustrating situation, ‘many male-to-females opt for a prosthetic penis and await advances in technology.’¹⁰¹ It is the awareness of the seeming limits of technology in such FTM narratives, and an acceptance of it, that makes them read as comedy in the definition established by Hayden White, a ‘reconciliation... of men with their world, their society.’¹⁰²

Clearly, Mario Martino was not willing to be reconciled with the world, trying again and again to undergo a successful phalloplasty, even as it became increasingly apparent that the procedure was inadequate. He resembled in some ways the unstable FTMs that Mark Rees worried about, men who ‘ignoring all the risks (of phalloplasty), undergo it anyway in the hope of then feeling “whole.”’¹⁰³ Martino’s willingness to undergo dangerous surgeries with small chances of success speak to a number of themes peculiar to transsexual discourse. Firstly it was a manifestation of what Bernice Hausman has called the ‘demanding subjectivity’ of transsexuality, in which transsexuality as an identity is dependent upon the enunciation of the desire for sex-change technologies. This demand is repeated and repeated until the identity is recognised by another, typically a medical ‘gatekeeper’. It is, she argues, in the actual process of demanding itself that the identity is formulated.¹⁰⁴ Martino’s repeated requests for phalloplastic procedures clearly mark him into this mechanism of self-construction, one which Harry Benjamin and Robert Stoller both recognised as a symptom of transsexuality, with

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p.150.

¹⁰¹ Hewitt, *A Self-Made Man*, p.71.

¹⁰² Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, (Baltimore, MD., 1973), p.9.

¹⁰³ Rees, *Dear Sir or Madam?* p.150.

¹⁰⁴ Hausman, *Changing Sex*, pp.110-140.

Benjamin insisting as early as 1954 that 'the transsexualist always seeks medical aid.'¹⁰⁵ Martino's narrative also echoed the willingness of Morris, McCloskey, Brevard *et al* to endure great pain in order to achieve their goals. By lying in a hot bath and cutting away his dead flesh, Martino unconsciously accessed the same register of self-harm for self-construction that Morris used when she claimed to have been willing to cut her own penis off. In a sense, Martino's hoped-for new penis was not the central issue, it was his *desire* for that penis and his readiness to pay for it in pain that allowed him to truly consider himself a man. If he were not truly a man, why would he want a penis – and it was a scientific fact that he should have one – so very badly? Because transsexuality was (and is) so very unusual an identity, it often required rather extreme public proof of its reality. Typically this was some form of (or desire for) genital surgeries. As I said, it was MTF economics professor Deirdre McCloskey who understood this exchange necessity best: 'being able to say you are finished, complete, really a woman by the no-penis criterion is the most powerful rhetoric for acceptance of behaviour that does not otherwise inspire acceptance.'¹⁰⁶ Martino's willingness to undergo dangerous operations might have seemed strange, but it perhaps would have seemed *less* strange than somebody considering themselves to be male whilst still having a body society recognised as female. It was then, only the sheer paucity of result in most phalloplasties that prevented some later FTMs like Rees and Hewitt from undergoing the procedure which would perhaps have most concretely marked them out as men in a phallogocentric society.¹⁰⁷ This is in marked contrast to MTF narratives – every single one of which I have read in the course of this project resulted in vaginoplasty of some sort because the procedure was known to be relatively safe and regularly successful in terms of aesthetics and function. Many MTFs have written in delight at the beautiful appearance of their neo-vaginas and have recorded in detail their blissful new vaginal sexual experiences. So if medical science could come up with a working vagina, why not a penis?

¹⁰⁵ Harry Benjamin, 'Transsexualism and Transvestism as Psycho-Somatic and Somato-Psychic Syndromes', *American Journal of Psychotherapy* 8 (1954), p.238.

¹⁰⁶ McCloskey, *Crossing*, p.190.

¹⁰⁷ Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed*, pp.245-256.

The Difficult Pole

The non-surgical literature on the failure of phalloplastic technologies in the twentieth century is sparse. Only Marjorie Garber and Bernice Hausman have paid it much attention outside of the annals of aesthetic surgery and urology.¹⁰⁸ Even so, between them Garber and Hausman have created a sharply divided debate on the issue, one which neatly reflects some of the major themes of transsexual discourse. For Garber it is an ideological issue which exposes transsexuality's dependency on patriarchal gender stereotypes, whilst for Hausman the failure of phalloplasty is rooted in the material limits of human corporeality, highlighting transsexuality's need to impose the gendered mind upon the sexed body. Neither writer, however, considers the contingent nature of phalloplasty as a function of the relationship between gynaecology and urology, nor do they look to the pivotal issue of technological failure's relationship with the forces of medical supply and patient demand. Garber does look to the role of science, but insists that it is the wider patriarchal ideologies at work within the medical community which created the problems with the artificial penis. It is, she writes, a 'political as much as a scientific fact' that an aesthetically pleasing and functional penis cannot be created whilst the same qualities are relatively easy to procure for an artificial vagina.¹⁰⁹ Garber argues that scientific progress, and the research money on which it is so often dependent, have 'historically been tied to a strong desire within the culture for medical progress' in a particular area. This desire, she goes on, is absent in a patriarchal, phallogocentric culture which has a 'sneaking suspicion that it should not be so easy to "construct" a "man."¹¹⁰ Whilst this certainly deals with the supposedly naturally occurring reality of the 'scientific fact' it hardly makes much sense of the intense FTM demand (*desire*) to engage with that phallogocentric discourse. Garber, whose work is clearly social-constructionist in nature, admits that whilst some surgeons have made 'individual advances in technique' the culture itself 'does not yet support the construction of "real men" by this route, preferring cold baths, rugged physical labour and male bonding rituals... depending on

¹⁰⁸ Many writers on transsexuality have commented on the problems with FTM genital surgery, but, with the exceptions of Garber and Hausman, none actually consider the reasons behind this. Leslie Lothstein, for example, simply says the procedure is 'experimental and fraught with difficulties', without explaining the provenance of these concerns. Lothstein, *Female to Male Transsexualism*, p.300.

¹⁰⁹ Garber, *Vested Interests*, p.103.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.102.

the economic and cultural context.¹¹¹ Yet as we have seen, in the legal cultures of twentieth century America and Britain, cold baths and male bonding did not count as man-signs unless accompanied by a penis – and no amount of rugged physical labour would make up for being revealed to lack a penis. Garber suggests that the social construction of masculinity indicates an 'implicit privileging of the phallus' in so far as it is not something that can be attained through acquired gendered behaviour. But what her argument really hinges on is an implicit privileging of the medical profession in transsexual discourse. When she talks about the 'desire' to make medical advances she refers only to the surgeons involved, ignoring the actual demand-makers, the FTMs themselves. It was they who wanted a penis and they – by Garber's own admission – who invested so intensely in the social signs of masculinity. Their intense desire stems precisely from the patriarchal ideologies (manifest here in the scientific fact) that Garber suggests prevent the success of phalloplasty. Plastic and aesthetic surgeons were no less beholden to these ideologies than anyone else, but Garber is wrong to suggest that this would influence them against research into better phalloplastic procedures. It was their very investment in the idea that men (people who act in certain ways coded as male) should have a penis that led them to investigate the possibility of creating an artificial penis in the first place.¹¹²

Bernice Hausman suggests that Garber's mistake is to 'subsume any consideration of technology within an argument about ideology' – a comment born out of her own stated position that it is only through advances in medical science that the ideologies behind transsexuality can be put in tangible practice.¹¹³ To explain the failure of phalloplasty, Hausman looks to the limits of the body itself and the actual, undeniable physiognomic differences between the penis and the vagina. Her rationale for this is brutally frank: 'As should be clear, making a penis that can both urinate and become erect is a vastly more difficult technical problem than constructing a working vagina, regardless of the ideological context within which the medical research takes place.'¹¹⁴ In naming urination and sexual function as the two major categories of success for transsexual genitalia, Hausman points up

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.104.

¹¹² Hausman, *Changing Sex*, pp.72-109.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, p.69.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

an interesting explanation for the failure of phalloplasty: the awareness within transsexual discourse that the new genitalia could never be used for reproduction, which potentially might have been a third category for assessment. If one discounts reproduction as a category, then the female genitalia, like as not, becomes a fairly simple unit which requires little tissue-level alteration for urination or sex. Yet if you discount reproduction for the penis, it still must become erect for sex, which makes things far more complex technically. The surgical creation of the plastic phallus is easy enough, but making it change shape at the right times is incredibly difficult. Of course, when Hausman says that this level of difficulty exists regardless of ideological context, she ignores the fact that the categories for success are the ideological context – one of heterosexuality within a phallogentric culture. If, as we see Chapter Three, the vagina is easier to make because it is judged on how well it does at heterosex, then we might call that a technology delimited by an ideology. If the ideological context changed and there was a demand that the MTF transsexual could also bear children then clearly the creation of female genitalia would suddenly become far more difficult. Despite the fact that many MTFs did express a desire to have children, none ever felt that it was a social marker of womanhood in the way that simply not having a penis (and then having a vagina) was. Thus the ideological context, and technological limitations, kept the penis as the most challenging plastic organ.¹¹⁵

Hausman, as I have noted, bases much of her analysis of transsexuality upon 'the resistances of the body to ideological captation' – which we could consider to be, if not a Marxist-influenced position, then certainly a materialist one. In this the physical conditions (the body itself) available to a culture/society (the medical profession, transsexual patients)

¹¹⁵ Germaine Greer is mistaken on this issue. She claims that 'No so-called sex-change has ever begged for a uterus-and-ovaries transplant; if uterus-and-ovaries transplants were mandatory for wannabe women they would disappear overnight.' Consider, however, the delight of April Ashley's friend, Bambi, when a surgeon told her he hoped also to transplant wombs: 'How wonderful!' Wisely, knowing the technological problems, rather than not desiring the end result, Ashley declined to be a guinea pig. Similarly, Jan Morris, despite having been a father, mourned that she had experienced 'all the joys of life except childbirth'. It is not that the desire is not there, but the technology. Womb-and-ovary transplants are not possible in genetic women either. Greer, *The Whole Woman*, p.81; Ashley, *Odyssey*, p.67; Morris, *Conundrum*, p.140. See also Dan O'Connor, 'Potential Space, Potential Sex: The Value of the Vagina in Transsexual Autobiography', in Christopher E. Forth & Ivan Crozier (eds), *Body Parts: Critical Engagements With Corporeality* (Lanham, MD., 2005), pp.166-167.

dictate the pace of technological change and progress.¹¹⁶ She suggests that the very materiality of the body will ultimately 'escape or exceed' its 'signifying function in the symbolic system' which she explains as the relative failure of phalloplasty versus vaginoplasty being the result not of a phallogocentric discourse, but of the limits of 'sexual differences at the level of tissue function.'¹¹⁷ However, I would suggest that sexual difference at the level of tissue function can only be understood, expressed and explored by the medical profession *within* the confines of a symbolic system that they understand and which authorises their belief in those differences. Whether or not a penis is more complicated than a vagina is a question that has to find form in language for it to mean anything at all – and it begs the further question, which Hausman does not herself address – of *why* the language of medical science (or the discourse of plastic surgery, or the symbolic system of gender difference) operates in such a way as to consider the penis more complicated. In short, we need to look to the historical contingencies that allowed Stanley Baxter, a surgeon from Colorado, to joke in 2000 that 'Hey, it's easier to make a hole than a pole!'¹¹⁸

The failure of phalloplasty has its roots in the pathologisation of the female body. Historians of medicine have long acknowledged the various ways in which the medical profession viewed the female body as difficult and dangerous. In seeking to control the female body, which seemed so unstable and disruptive in comparison to the apparently natural and regular male, medical science also gained a vast array of knowledge about it.¹¹⁹ By attempting to understand and regulate childbirth, menstruation and other 'female problems', whilst at the same time expressing no similar need to discipline male (hetero)sexuality, the medical profession (perhaps unconsciously) ensured that gynaecology would be far more sophisticated than urology. Indeed, the very names given to the two specialities suggest a more detailed approach to the former than the latter. That the medical study of the male genitalia is named 'urology' rather than 'andrology' (as in *gynaecology*)

¹¹⁶ Hausman, *Changing Sex*, p.70.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.69, 70.

¹¹⁸ Quoted on *Changing Sex*, Channel 4, 15 January 2002.

¹¹⁹ For this see: Jo Bridgeman (ed.), *Law and Body Politics: Regulating the Female Body* (Aldershot, 1995); Barbara Duden, *The Woman Beneath the Skin: a Doctor's Patient's in Eighteenth Century Germany* (Cambridge, MA.,1991); *id.*, *Disembodying Women: Perspectives on Pregnancy and the Unborn* (Cambridge, MA.,1993); Hilary Marland, *The Art of Midwifery: Early Modern Midwives in Europe* (London, 1993).

suggests that the 'andro' components of the organs in question – that is, having sex and reproduction – are either of secondary importance (unlikely) or simply considered so safe and reliable that they hold no real interest for the profession. The retarded nature of urology has been made apparent by David Friedman in his account of the invention of Viagra, the male potency drug. In a chapter called 'The Punctureproof Balloon' he recounts in detail the many quackish attempts, frequently outside of 'mainstream' medicine, to find a way of curing male impotence. Monkey testicles were transplanted – with exceptional popularity – by the Russian surgeon Serge Voronoff in the 1920s and 30s. Rigid acrylic rods were implanted into the penis by Willard Goodwin in late 1940s California, and in 1973, Michael Small and Hernan Carrion developed sponge filled silicon rods for insertion into the malfunctioning penis. None of these products were at all successful because the scientists involved simply did not understand how the penis became erect. Yet by the middle of the 1960s a safe and affordable way of regulating female fertility had been found and abortion and hysterectomy had become reliable, procedures free (mostly) of danger. It was only in 1982 that, independently, two researchers; the French surgeon, Ronald Virag, and the American urologist, Giles Brindley, discovered that the key to the male erection, physiologically speaking at least, was the smooth-muscle relaxation which allowed the shaft of the penis to trap blood and remain hard. This could be affected, both men realised after experimentation, by chemical alteration – the upshot of which was the development of Viagra and a thousand very bad jokes. Friedman's interviewees make clear why this fairly simple medical discovery took so long to come to light. Irwin Goldstein, of the Boston University Urology Clinic, recalled that 'There was a taboo against studying male sexual biology in detail... If you studied the heart everyone applauded. But the penis? People thought you were a pervert.'¹²⁰ This assumption of perversion stemmed, I think, from the dominant cultural idea that male sexual biology was not problematic and thus an interest in it indicated some sort of peccadillo. It also resulted, as Arthur Burnett of Johns Hopkins told Friedman about urological education, in a situation wherein 'what we learned in medical school was wrong.'¹²¹

¹²⁰ Friedman, *A Mind of Its Own*, p.216.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, p.217.

Hampered by a cultural disinterest in the problems of the genetic male penis, never mind those of the transsexual equivalent, phalloplasty was handicapped from the start. A lack of scientific knowledge about the penis (why learn about something that didn't go wrong?) meant that phalloplastic procedures were, even by the late 1970s when male impotence became a topic of public debate, being undertaken without knowing exactly what was trying to be achieved: hence the depressing failure rate. No wonder an artificial penis could not be made to become properly erect if no-one really knew how a regular penis did so. Certainly, to go along with Hausman's suggestion, it remained far more difficult to create an actual penis than to create an actual vagina – especially if one takes the phallocratic conception of the vagina as simply a potential space – but that realisation gap is not wholly the progeny of an asymbollic material corporeality.¹²² Technological failure, as the engineer Henry Petroski writes, must be considered in cultural context.¹²³ Projects fail not simply because the problem they are ranged at is too difficult, but because the knowledge available to them is insufficient and *therefore* the problem becomes too difficult. The human body is only resistant to Hausman's 'ideological captation' because the technology available to those ideologies is not yet advanced enough. In the case of phalloplasty this technological retardation is explained by the circumstances of disinterest which historically surrounded the sexual components of urology.

Yet as Friedman makes clear in his history of the penis, interest in those components began to be made public in the last quarter of the twentieth century – as the millions of regular Viagra users testify.¹²⁴ The new acceptability of male sexuality as a medical speciality lead to some advances in phalloplastic technologies. The British TV channel, Channel 4, showed FTM Stephen Whittle undergoing very successful phalloplasty in 2002, and in the same year the American documentarist Candace Schemerhorn filmed the satisfied

¹²² O'Connor, 'Potential Space, Potential Sex', p.163.

¹²³ Henry Petroski, *Invention by Design: How Engineers Get From Thought to Thing* (Cambridge, MA., 1996), pp.89-103.

¹²⁴ Friedman, *A Mind of Its Own*, p.220. According to the Urological Sciences Research Foundation, by 2000, Viagra had been prescribed to more than 6.1 million men in the United States alone. See <http://www.usrf.org/breakingnews/viagra-usage2000.html> (first viewed 16 February, 2004).

testimonies of several post-operative FTMs.¹²⁵ Whilst the procedures (for there is no standard phalloplastic operation, unlike for vaginoplasty) are still not totally successful – a rod or a pump is often still required for erection and appearance remains a problem – progress seems to be being made. Even in 1994, Raymond Thompson, a Welsh FTM, wrote in his autobiography, *What Took You So Long?* about a partially successful phalloplasty.¹²⁶ He had to choose between a neo-phallus which could become erect and one which he was able to urinate out of. He chose to be able to urinate, insisting that ‘sex is not the issue for me... I need to be able to feel comfortable in myself all day, every day.’¹²⁷ Again we see a Comedic accommodation with the possibilities of the world, a man coming to terms with what he can and cannot change about his material reality. If Deirdre McCloskey would later ask, ‘how many times a day do people check your genitals?’, then perhaps Thompson’s desire to be able to ‘pee at the urinal like the other guys’ was the answer.¹²⁸ It was knowing that he could ‘show’ his privates in public that gave him the ‘everyday’ reassurance against the ‘absolute exposure’ of not having a penis.

Deirdre McCloskey would approve, I think, of the way in which phalloplasty has developed in transsexual discourse, for it may be a matter of supply and demand. Knowing the limits of phalloplasty, many FTMs opted not to undergo it, settling instead for a prosthesis, and thus avoiding the need to visit several surgeons and once more tell their autobiographical stories of sex/gender dissonance. Of late this seems to be changing, as Joanne Meyerowitz reports, ‘today, some doctors in the United States find roughly equivalent numbers of male-to-females and female-to-males.’¹²⁹ Thus it may be that there are now enough FTMs undergoing experimental phalloplastic procedures to push the technology along as surgeons learn from one another in journal articles, books and conference papers. As the male sexual anatomy becomes better understood and more FTMs come forward demanding the benefits of this new understanding, the artificial penis is perhaps not so far away from looking as good and acting as well as its vaginal partner. There is a striking echo in Thompson’s

¹²⁵ *Make Me a Man*, Channel 4, 7 August 2002; *Third Sex*, Channel 4, 28 October 2002.

¹²⁶ Thompson, *What Took You So Long?* pp.260-302.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.261.

¹²⁸ McCloskey, *Crossing*, p.190; Thompson, *What Took You So Long?* p.264.

¹²⁹ Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed*, p.9.

autobiography of the wince-inducing necrosis passages in Martino's, as Thompson looks daily at his new penis, desperately urging it to 'stay pink, stay pink, stay pink... I tried not to think of the word black. "Pink, pink, pink, pink." I stroked it and talked to it. "Please stay pink. You have to. I need you. You can't go black on me and die now, not after what we've been through."¹³⁰ And it did not go black, and it did not die on him. In his narrative, the phalloplasty forms the final few chapters, bringing his life-story to some sort of resolution whereby he is able to pronounce that 'I could forget how I was born. I was and always had been a man, and that fact was unalterable.'¹³¹

The 'scientific fact' that all men have a penis, however, was very clearly subject to alteration. Women like April Ashley and Jan Morris did everything in their power to get rid of it. Men like Mario Martino and Raymond Thompson risked much to get hold of it. In no transsexual autobiography does the struggle ever manifest itself as a desire to 'get rid' or 'get' a vagina. Repeatedly, the female genitalia are represented as little more than the absence of their male counterparts. Initially, this seems like a glaringly patriarchal, misogynistic conception of sexual difference. However, what I think we see also in transsexual autobiographies is the sheer instability of that conception. If the penis can be taken off, put on, removed, faked, pedicled, taped to someone's buttocks, then it might be said to lose some of its star quality. Returning to Peter Lehman's concern that 'patriarchy is at its most cantered' when the penis is 'hidden away', we can see in transsexual autobiographies a totally exposed penis, one whose 'natural' signification of maleness and 'man' is revealed as a contingent, malleable sex sign.¹³²

¹³⁰ Thompson, *What Took You So Long?* p.301.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, p.309.

¹³² Lehman, *Running Scared*, p.5.

Chapter Two

From Bigger Breasts to Hairy Chests:
Secondary Sex Signs in Transsexual Identity and Autobiography

Second Thoughts

April Ashley's *Odyssey* opens with 'dear old Prince Max von Hohenlohe-Langenburg, fat and twinkly in his decorations' addressing her at a dinner party. 'I was wondering,' he said over the fish course, 'what colour your nipples are. Brown or pink? Ashley, unflappable in 'ice-pink shantung', smiled and said 'The palest, Max, pink.'¹ This exchange is typical of what follows in Ashley's autobiography; a funny, glamorous life constantly marked by the need to signify her sex. What interests us about Prince Max is the way in which he asks Ashley to make that signification. The glitzy post-war European party circuit on which Ashley was such a fixture in the late 1950s and early 1960s was notably debauched. It was not so far gone from conventional morality, however, that a nobleman could ask to see a woman's vagina at the dinner table.² He could, though, ask a question about her breasts and whether her nipples were a manly brown or a girlish pink. Even this, of course, was rather rude, but it was based upon a broadly-held belief in the public quality of breasts as sex signs. Breasts were visible (even when clothed) in a way that the penis and the vagina typically were not. Thus they functioned not as an intimate, 'private' signifier of sex reserved for lovers or medico-legal examination, but as an everyday way of signifying sex in public.

This chapter once more takes up Deirdre McCloskey's wry question, 'how many times a day do people check your genitals?'³ The answer, a result of the laws and social conditioning that surround nudity in this period, is, of course, not very many.⁴ What *can* be checked whilst avoiding charges of public indecency on all sides are 'secondary' sex-signs like breasts, body hair, physique and facial shape. Breasts may not always be acceptably exposed in full public view but they, much like a beard, are publicly visible in ways that the penis (or lack thereof) is

¹ April Ashley with Duncan Fallowell, *April Ashley's Odyssey* (London, 1982), p. 1.

² The British tabloid press of the time thrived on stories of continental immorality. See, for example, Ronald Handyside, 'The Wickedest Street in the World', *The People*, 27 August 1961, pp. 13-14.

³ Deirdre McCloskey, *Crossing: a Memoir* (Chicago, IL., 1999), p.190.

⁴ See Ruth Barcan, *Nudity: A Cultural Anatomy* (New York, NY., 2004).

not. In simple public encounters breasts can signify female, whilst facial hair signifies male. Thus, throughout the second half of the twentieth century, these (and other) secondary sex-signs became vital tools which enabled transsexuals to pass as male or female. Whilst when it came right down to it legally and emotionally, genital sex distinction still reigned supreme, secondary sex-signs were the foot soldiers in the more everyday battles transsexuals fought for recognition and acceptance. In this chapter I look particularly at the roles played by breasts and body hair in the signification of 'woman' and 'man' in transsexual autobiographies. This discussion is underpinned by three main issues: 'secondary' as a value judgement rather than a scientific principle, the historicised nature of these sex-signs as compared to the genitals, and the non-transsexual nature of the medical technologies involved.

In his medical path-breaker, *The Transsexual Phenomenon* (1966), the American endocrinologist Harry Benjamin took time to note the 'chief differential diagnostic' between transsexuality and transvestism – conditions which were frequently used as synonyms even by medical professionals. For the transvestite, he suggested, it was enough simply to *appear* as the opposite sex, whilst transsexuals wanted to '*be and to function*' as members of that sex. For transvestites, their birth-body (usually male) was still of use and pleasure to them. In the condition of transsexuality, however, he explained, 'their sex organs, the primary (testes) as well as the secondary (penis and others) are disgusting deformities that must be changed with a surgeon's knife.'⁵ I have already elaborated on the disgust felt towards the penis by MTF transsexuals, suggesting in the previous chapter that it was the primary organ of significance in narratives of sex-change, so what interests me here is Benjamin's suggestion that the penis is 'secondary' to the generative organ of the testes. Benjamin was working, of course, out of a biomedical background and so his criteria for primacy were grounded in that particular discourse and its understanding of the 'ontogeny and significance' of sex difference.⁶ Such biomedical science worked in a linear fashion, making the external

⁵ Harry Benjamin, *The Transsexual Phenomenon* (New York, NY., 1966), pp.13-14. His italics.

⁶ For an orthodox example of the biomedical position at this time see Christopher Ounsted & David C. Taylor (eds), *Gender Differences: Their Ontogeny and Significance* (Edinburgh and London, 1972); C.R. Austin & R.V. Short, *Embryonic and Fetal Development: Reproduction in Mammals, Book 2* (Cambridge, 1972).

presence of a penis (or clitoris/labia) contingent upon the fetal pre-existence of testosterone-producing testicles (or oestrogen-producing ovaries) which are themselves predicated upon the chromosomal XY (or XX) make-up which dictated the Mullerian (male) or Wolffian (female) development of otherwise similar fetal genital physiognomies. Thus for Benjamin, the penis was but one more 'phenotypic' (that is, visible) sex-sign dependent upon the far more important internal signs which, as a hormone-focused endocrinologist, he specialised in. In gaining the scientific community's acceptance of transsexuality as a genuine medical condition, rather than some perverse social paraphilia, it was vital that Benjamin explain it in a public language of contemporarily acceptable sex-science.⁷ Thus he deliberately subsumed the transsexual focus upon the external genitalia (which could have been seen as overtly erotic and thus suspect) within the strictures of scientific discourse. However, contemporaneous medical technology and transsexual desire undermined the idea that the testes (or ovaries) were the primary *signifiers* of sexual difference in men and women. Medical knowledge stretched only as far as the removal of the gonads; it could not even begin to attempt their functional replacement with their opposite number, whilst the penis and the vagina could both be 'removed' and 'replaced' with one and other (albeit with varying degrees of success). This material possibility, and the very real problems of visibility, meant that outside of the strictly expert scientific discourse Benjamin needed to stay within, the penis and vagina were the primary signifiers of sexual difference – made so, as I suggested in my last chapter, by the exigencies of a popular culture which demanded visible binary difference. In the transsexual calculus of significance it was invariably the removal (or creation) of a penis, rather than the gonadal, which was of central importance. Thus those signs which Benjamin grouped along with the penis ('and others') – such as breasts, body hair, muscle tone and facial shape – are what I take in this chapter as secondary sex signs. For whilst the removal or addition of breasts and body hair was significant to transsexuals writing in the second half

⁷ This is very similar to the tactics adopted by William Masters and Virginia Johnson in their *Human Sexual Response* (Boston, MA., 1966), which according to the historian and documentarist, Tom Hickman, was 'so badly written that it might well have been in Sanskrit.' The heavy reliance on scientific language was, Masters explained, because, 'we were concerned primarily with acceptance... In fact we re-wrote it to make the language as technical and non-inflammatory as we could.' Tom Hickman, *The Sexual Century: How Private Passion Became a Public Obsession* (London, 1999), p.135.

of the twentieth century, they were by no means as uniformly central to their identities as were the genital signs of the preceding chapter.

The significance of secondary sex-signs to transsexuals was mostly public. Possession of the correct secondary signs could, by their non-genital nature, allow a transsexual to convince as their chosen sex in a socially appropriate manner. To pass as a man or a woman in public, rather than in bed or in the doctor's surgery, seems in transsexual autobiographies a less-than-absolute matter. To pass at the secondary level, 'on the street', is to meet everyday expectations of how a man or a woman should appear. The examination is less acute; a glance, a look. Yet cursory as such judgements can appear, there remains in the autobiographies a 'weirdly strong' anxiety to pass as a man or a woman and not to be read as a transsexual.⁸ We can see this worry in Jan Morris's encounter with the security guards at New York's Kennedy airport when, unsure how to choose between the men's and women's search-queues, she simply stood, near-paralysed:

An awful moment passes. Everyone seems to be looking at me. Then "Move along there, lady, please, don't hold up the traffic" – and instantly I join the female queue, am gently and (as it proves) not all that skilfully frisked by a girl who thanks me for my cooperation, and emerge from another small crisis pleased (for of course, I have hoped for this conclusion all along) but shaken too.⁹

Morris, on this occasion was pre-operative and still had her penis. However, her course of female oestrogen hormones had softened her build and fleshed out her breasts enough that a brief pat-down by a security guard allowed her to pass as a woman. A full body search, of course, would not have done so, but by what was appropriate for this cursory examination – no genital contact, much like strangers passing in the street – her secondary sex-signs convinced her 'audience' that she was female. Secondary-based passing did not just bring relief at avoiding the inevitable embarrassment or even anger, it could bring delight, too, as

⁸ McCloskey, *Crossing*, p.163.

⁹ Jan Morris, *Conundrum* (reprint, with intro by Jan Morris, 2002, orig., London, 1974), p.96.

Paul Hewitt knew. Walking home from the train station, he saw a car break down, "Excuse me, mate," called the male driver, "could you give us a push?" He had called *me* mate, how could I possibly refuse?!¹⁰ How indeed? Hewitt, too, was pre-operative, but with his breasts closely bound to his chest, this sort of acceptance into the public language of expected male body-shapes was precisely the aim of his transsexual treatments. To be able to say 'I am a man' or 'I am a woman' and not have it challenged to the point of genital distinction, was the ultimate prize of transsexuality.

Winning this prize, however, required a working knowledge of an ever-changing lexicon of signs. For, whilst throughout the second half of the twentieth century penis meant man and no penis (vagina) meant woman, secondary sex characteristics were not always so absolute. Time and place, social circle and cultural background affected how individual transsexuals, and their 'audiences' viewed breasts, body hair and all the rest. As Marianne Thessander has shown with regards to fashions in the female body, the ultra-feminine curves of the 1950s eventually faded into the 'thin and girlish' trends of the 1960s and 1970s – themselves eventually supplanted by the 'fit' form of the 1980s.¹¹ The same fluctuations were true for the male body. What in the provincial towns of countryside England was girlishly long hair and suspiciously feminine eyeliner was in swinging sixties London no more surprising than the next drop-out in bell-bottoms and a kaftan. Much of this contingency was due to the fact that the technologies and fashions available to transsexuals for the alteration of secondary sex-signs were also available to the non-transsexual general public. This is in direct contrast to vaginoplasty and phalloplasty which, for the most, were accessed only by people undergoing sex-change procedures. Facelifts, bodybuilding steroids and 'boob-jobs' were all important to transsexual body alteration, but were also co-opted by men and women who wanted to heighten their own secondary sex signs.¹² The very universality of these medical products inevitably meant that they were applied in a variety of different ways in response to shifting trends in sexual presentation. For example a hairy chest in the 1960s was an obvious

¹⁰ Paul Hewitt, with Jane Warren, *A Self-Made Man: the Diary of a Man Born in a Woman's Body* (London, 1995), p.38.

¹¹ Marianne Thessander, *The Feminine Ideal* (London, 1997), p.179.

¹² On the widespread use of cosmetic/aesthetic surgery in the twentieth century, see Sander Gilman, *Making the Body Beautiful: A Cultural History of Aesthetic Surgery* (Princeton, NJ., 2002); Elizabeth Haiken, *Venus Envy: A History of Cosmetic Surgery* (Baltimore, MD., 1997).

indicator of virile manhood, but by the mid 1990s waxing and shaving of male chest hair had become comparatively common without necessarily undermining the masculinity of the men who did so.¹³ Perhaps one of the most interesting things to note about the discussion that follows is that in the face of these shifting sex trends transsexuals themselves tended to hold firm to well established norms. The very nature of change itself seems to have directed their decisions. There arguably would have been very little point in 'changing sex' only to adopt a fashionably androgynous look. Dependent as they were upon distinct and binary ideas of 'male' and 'female' to make sense of their transition, transsexuals made strategic use of the more traditional, conservative even, lexicon of secondary sex-signs.

I begin this chapter with the direct connotation of breasts with femininity, examining first of all FTM disgust at their woman-signifying breasts. I then look to the role of the breast in MTF narratives, examining their use as signifiers of femininity, but also re-reading the role of plastic surgical technologies in this creation of female identity by comparing MTF testimony with work that has been done on breast cancer, mastectomy and 'reconstruction'. Body hair is then cast as a goal of FTM secondary sex stories, along with increased musculature and strength, a contrast to the vignettes of shaving, waxing and electrolysis that pepper MTF autobiographies. Throughout, the organising principle of the chapter will be to underline the both ways in which transsexuals utilised popular discourses of sexual difference to pass as men or women in public, and how they used popular, 'non-transsexual' medical technologies to do so.

Man Versus Breast

If western metaphysics and transatlantic popular culture failed to recognise the vagina as anything more than a bit-part in the story of sexual difference, then it may have been because they were holding out for the breast. Commentators have not been slow to make the point. 'Breasts,' writes Kathy Davis, 'are irrevocably linked with cultural notions about femininity.

¹³ Susan Bordo, *The Male Body: A New Look at Men in Public and in Private* (New York, NY., 1997), pp.168-228.

Particularly in Western culture, femininity and voluptuous breasts go together.¹⁴ Historian Marilyn Yalom agrees, suggesting that throughout Western history breasts have taken on a 'predominantly erotic meaning' as the 'crown jewels of femininity' – a supposition to which she adds by insisting that it is 'women to whom breasts ultimately belong.'¹⁵ In his discussion of aesthetic surgery, Sander Gilman notes that this linkage of breast and femininity – 'the assumption that any discussion of the breast is defined by its role as a sign of femininity (as opposed to masculinity)' – lends itself to codification. Rather like David Friedman's 'scientific fact that men have a penis', Gilman posits 'this binary opposition' of 'women have breasts, men don't.'¹⁶ There is a novel sense of specificity here, far removed from the idea of 'lack' which characterised discussions of the vagina. It is *possession* of breasts, rather than the lack of a hairy, muscular chest, which connotes femininity. Small wonder then, that FTM transsexuals viewed their breasts with just the sort of opprobrium which characterised MTF views of the penis.

For Mark Rees, growing up in 1950s Britain, breasts were indeed the most obvious sign of a distinctly female body. When he entered adolescence and puberty he began to regard himself as 'male, cursed with a female body' which was signified not by the vagina (which Rees barely mentioned) but by the breasts. He wrote that, 'In spite of pleading with the Almighty that I'd find myself developing into a man, I too began to develop breasts.'¹⁷ It was, quite clearly, the development of breasts which marked him out as a woman, distinct from the man he wished to be, who would have lacked them. Rees's antipathy toward his breasts was strong enough for him to call them 'the offending parts ... a deformity which I abhorred.'¹⁸ It is this idea of the breasts as a 'deformity', as an unnatural growth, which mostly clearly speaks the popular language of man as a creature lacking breasts. In the world in which Mark Rees went through puberty breasts loomed large as the most visible (if decorously clad) signifiers of femininity, something which both Elizabeth Haiken and Marianne Thessander see in the post-

¹⁴ Kathy Davis, *Reshaping the Female Body: the Dilemma of Cosmetic Surgery* (London, 1995), p.9.

¹⁵ Marilyn Yalom, *A History of the Breast* (London, 1998), pp.3, 8.

¹⁶ Gilman, *Making the Body Beautiful*, p.218; David M. Friedman, *A Mind of Its Own: a Cultural History of the Penis* (London, 2002), p.5.

¹⁷ Mark Rees, *Dear Sir or Madam? the Autobiography of a Female to Male Transsexual* (London, 1995), p.14.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

war 'glorification' of the 'sweater girl' – that perky, tightly-dressed figure best exemplified by the generously endowed Jane Mansfield, Marilyn Monroe, Jane Russell and Betty Grable.¹⁹ For a FTM transsexual such as Mark Rees to see his body developing along the same lines as these most publicly visible forms of idealised womanhood was a denial of everything he believed to be true about himself. And yet, reliant as he was on the popular languages of sexual distinction of the time, it would be difficult for him to authorise anyone else's belief in himself as a man whilst he had breasts. Thus he made 'every effort' to 'hide my anatomical sex', scorning school summer-dresses and wearing instead 'sweltering' hot shirts, ties and jackets. And whilst the rest of his female contemporaries were imitating Jane and Marilyn in 'a figure-hugging school jersey' Rees insisted instead upon 'wearing my blazer indoors.'²⁰ Of course, all his school mates knew him as a girl, but his 'sartorial eccentricity' marked him out from his 'more feminine' friends just enough to provide him with some comfort.

Even so, Mark's mother did not want him to hide his breasts; she wanted him to support them, triggering the 'great battles of the bra' in the Rees household. 'I angrily spurned the bra which my mother bought me when I was fourteen,' he wrote, for 'to have worn it would be not only accepting my femininity, but accentuating it. I could do neither.'²¹ And so he screwed up the 'offending item' and hid it away. He could hide his bra away from himself, and even conceal his breasts from public view, but he still knew he had them – a knowledge which caused such anguish as to result in self-harm: 'in the privacy of my room I pummelled my hated breasts with fury.'²² This violent admission has no real analogy in MTF accounts of the penis. Whilst many transsexuals who wrote autobiographies hid their penis and all despaired of it, none actually took to punching it in disgust. This may simply be because a punch in the penis is not really something one is capable of doing to oneself more than once in succession, but it also speaks volumes for the fetish value of the breast in the public language of sexual difference. In strictly biological terms Mark (then Brenda) Rees's breasts were not the cause of her female body, they were the result of it, developing out of the increased estrogen hormone production of her (publicly invisible) ovaries. In public terms, however,

¹⁹ Haiken, *Venus Envy*, p.243; Thessander, *The Feminine Ideal*, pp.155-178.

²⁰ Rees, *Dear Sir or Madam?* p.14.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p.16.

²² *Ibid.*

Rees's breasts would have been the cause of his being named female and thus his failure to pass as the man he wished to be. Mark's breasts, those authorisations of belief in his femininity, had to go. Thus, in early 1973, he had a bilateral mastectomy. Sander Gilman, reading Rees's autobiography, has suggested that 'the breasts, more than the penis, are the signs of her transformation.'²³ This is true, but it would be unwise to think that this was entirely due to the primacy of 'no breasts' over 'has a penis' in the significant scale of masculinity. Rees's happiness at losing his breasts must also be placed in context – at the time, as Rees well knew, phalloplastic operations were practically impossible, whilst breast augmentation and removal had a centuries' old pedigree.²⁴ There are material limits upon what can be done to the body, limits prescribed by the technology available at the time and thus the centrality of breasts in Rees's story may be historically contingent not just upon the cultural value of the breast as a sign of femininity, but on the scientific inadequacies of phalloplasty.

One curious note on Rees's bilateral mastectomy is that, whilst he certainly felt much better for it, he 'wasn't shouting for joy' and there was 'no sense of euphoria.' This oddly anti-climactic feeling he attributed to the sense that he had returned his body to its real shape, rather than had achieved some great transformation. 'Immediately after the surgery,' he wrote, 'I'd become accustomed to having a flat chest. In a way, it were as if my breasts had never existed. They had been a bad dream and I had woken up.'²⁵ A similar note was struck by Ray Thompson, who had his mastectomies a decade after Rees, in the early 1980s. His plastic surgeon, a rather corpulent man, couldn't see why Thompson wanted his breasts removed so badly. The surgeon even went so far as to lift up his shirt to show Thompson his own 'man-breasts', declaring, 'They're a lot bigger than yours. What are you worried about?' Thompson, not being a fat, self confident, genetically male, medical professional, was worried about passing, of course. He responded merely that 'I know that my chest isn't the way it's

²³ Gilman, *Making the Body Beautiful*, p.284. Gilman uses birth pro-nouns when writing about transsexuals.

²⁴ Davis, *Reshaping the Female Body*, pp.24-26; Yalom, *A History of the Breast*, pp.209-210; Haiken, *Venus Envy*, pp.235-245; Nora Jacobson, *Cleavage: Technology, Controversy, and the Ironies of the Man-Made Breast* (New Brunswick, NJ., 2000), pp.48-72.

²⁵ Rees, *Dear Sir or Madam?* p.117.

supposed to be.²⁶ Thompson, like Rees, wanted to be put back to 'normal' – which raises an interesting point about what the 'normal' chest shape for an adult male is. Clearly the fat plastic surgeon did not think himself to be a woman, even though he had bigger breasts than the genetic female in his consulting room. For Thompson, however, this was not the point – once again, the very nature of change, of transitioning convincingly from one cohort to another, demanded that he seek out an unequivocally male body. As I will show below, FTM transsexuals had a very idealised male body in mind; certainly not the flabby, overweight figure of a Harley Street specialist. Prior to his bilateral mastectomy, Thompson had gone to great and often painful lengths to disguise his breasts, in order to present the world with an obviously male physique. Whilst working on a building site during a 'very hot' summer, he was forced to sweat it out, 'constantly (having) to disguise my body. I was overly paranoid about it and all the layers of clothes I wore to hide my body made my working days a misery. No matter how hot I was I couldn't afford to take anything off,' unlike his fellow workers who could strip off to their skin and 'get brown in the sun'.²⁷ His way of disguising his breasts was not simply to wear many layers of clothing, but to bind them tightly to his chest, flattening them down as inconspicuously as possible. These ingenious procedures recall Caroline Cossey's sellotaped penis, or Renée Richard's string-between-the-buttocks strategies for hiding their male genitalia. Thompson's girlfriend, 'had made me a chest strap out of elastic bandages and a vest' into which he would struggle every morning. 'I wore it under all my clothes to make sure my chest was flat. It was uncomfortable and tight, but I felt more secure in it.'²⁸

The security came, of course, from being able to pass in public as a man, for the socio-cultural environment in which Thompson lived in, much like Rees's some years before, equated breasts with femininity. Presenting a flat chest to a public which spoke that particular language of sex differentiation authorised belief in Thompson as male. The hyper feminine images of Jane Mansfield, Brigitte Bardot, and the like, that lurked in the background of Rees's childhood had, of course, gone, only to be replaced by the time of Thompson's mid-

²⁶ Raymond Thompson with Kitty Sewell, *What Took You So Long? A Girl's Journey to Manhood* (London, 1996), p.177.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.145.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p.165

1970s adolescence with a series of far more overt images.²⁹ The 1960s also saw the rise of soft-core pornographic magazines, such as *Mayfair* and *Penthouse*, which specialised in pictures of naked and semi-naked women.³⁰ Most obviously, the *Sun* newspaper had begun to publish its daily photo shots of topless models, the 'Page Three Girls', in 1970, putting the 'women have breasts, men don't' equation firmly, and nakedly, on the breakfast tables of houses around the nation. Less sensationally, but equally central to the affirmation of the equation had been a series of 'permissive' legislation, which had liberalised Britain's archaic censorship laws. This meant that from relatively innocuous bra advertising through to outright pornography, the idea that 'women have breasts' was being made ever more publicly explicit. Of course, in intriguing contrast, 1960s Britain was also home to the most photographed woman on earth, the model, Twiggy, who was certainly not cut from the same cloth as Jane Mansfield. Twiggy's look 'was distinctly androgynous – a far cry from the twin peaks of the forties and fifties.'³¹ One might have expected this 'look' to have made an impact upon popular cultural ideas about female body shape. Indeed, as Yalom points out, whilst the fashions 'were by no means political, they joined frankly feminist women in popularizing an asexual look.'³² It was, though, precisely this androgyny, and that of the late 1970s punk fashion, which would have undermined the impact of the 'waiflike form' upon the body image of transsexuals. As Marjorie Garber has noted, the aim of transsexuals is to become manly men and womanly women, not to engineer their bodies into some fashionably ambivalent state of sex. Transsexuality is, as an ideal of distinct change, dependent upon traditional notions of sexual differentiation. There is a need within it for the sexes to be one thing or the other and nowhere in-between. If men and women were not to be binary corporeal opposites, as some of the more radical popular cultures of the 1960s and 1970s were suggesting, then why would anyone bother to change sex at all? Even in a culture which could produce 'gender-benders' like David Bowie and Siouxsie Sioux, transsexuality, contrary to its

²⁹ Thessander, *The Feminine Ideal*, pp.201-213.

³⁰ On this, see: Marcus Collins, 'The Pornography of Permissiveness: Men's Sexuality and Women's Emancipation in Mid Twentieth-Century Britain', *History Workshop Journal*, 47 (1999), pp.99-120. Collins makes note of one of *Mayfair's* most popular model 'types', 'the reformed tomboy' such as the former Navy Wren who had enjoyed wearing masculine clothing until "suddenly I realised I was a woman... the thought of wodging (sic) my new soft breasts into a tight serge uniform lost its attraction very quickly", (p.110).

³¹ Yalom, *A History of the Breast*, p.179.

³² *Ibid.*, p.180; Thessander, *The Feminine Ideal*, p.181.

reputation as a sexually subversive, counter-cultural condition, took its cues from more conservative, stable ideas of male and female.

Paul Hewitt fitted into this matrix very well during his transition in the early-to-mid 1990s. 'I have a dream,' he wrote, 'I want to be a real man. Am I to be confined inside this foreign body with breasts forever?'³³ In the text it is his breasts which made his body female to him. In common with other FTMs who wrote autobiographies, he rarely if ever made this connection in relation to his vagina or womb. *Pace* Rees's 'hated breasts', Hewitt pondered the growth of his breasts in his teenage years: 'When they emerged late on in puberty, who could foresee that I would grow to hate them so much?'³⁴ His hatred stemmed, as did Rees's, from the way in which breasts would mark him as a woman in the public eye. Curious then that before he came out as transsexual one of Hewitt's jobs was as a female stripper, 'doing over three hundred bookings.' As he himself admitted, this is 'probably not the occupation that springs to mind for a biological woman who goes on to seek gender reassignment to the male role.'³⁵ Unusual or not, his days as a stripogram are, in his autobiography, an opportunity to endorse a sense of alienation from his breasts:

While my breasts seemed to have a life force of their own – I've lost count of how many times men exclaimed "You don't get many of them to the pound!" – I began to hate myself more and more.³⁶

In separating 'self' from 'breasts' Hewitt was adopting a narrative strategy of disavowal, removing his publicly 'breasted' body from any association with the *I* of the core story. He further used this disassociation to retrospectively explain his unexpected career choice. 'Perhaps that's why I behaved like this,' he suggested, 'My female body just felt like a mask; it certainly wasn't part of me, so I wasn't ashamed to flaunt it.'³⁷ Whilst an MTF stripper-dancer

³³ Hewitt, *A Self-Made Man*, p.6.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p.8.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p.54.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p.55.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

such as Caroline Cossey disassociated herself from her publicly male body by hiding her penis between her legs, Hewitt asserted his independence from his female body simply by seeming not to care about it, allowing it in some ways to become the passive, non-agential 'object' of male lust which anti-pornography feminist theory speaks of.³⁸

Even so, there were times when trying to ignore his 'breasted' body simply would not work as a coping strategy. During the initial stages of his testosterone hormone treatment, he would check the progress of his body's changes toward masculinity: 'I gave myself the once-over in the mirror this morning... I am starting to see the appearance of a male body shaping up in the mirror. Shame about the huge tits!'³⁹ The jokey tone belies the hierarchy of feminine-specific classification in Hewitt's mind – he did not mention having a vagina, or any of its outside indicators (labia, clitoris), but clearly having breasts was the prime obstacle to having a male-appearing body. Thus, like Ray Thompson, Hewitt took to binding his breasts with 'eight elasticated metres of the widest crepe bandage I could find' which he then 'wound from my underarms down to my stomach, flattening the breasts which I view with contempt.'⁴⁰ This painful ritual allowed Hewitt to wear male clothing – 'each item' of which he bought helped to 'swell my male ego' – and thus to pass publicly as a man when he finally came out as transsexual.⁴¹ Yet simply binding breasts would not have been enough for a clinical diagnosis of the condition. The demand for surgery was, as Bernice Hausman points out, the key symptom of transsexuality, at least according to the medical professionals who enabled the transition itself.⁴² Thus Hewitt, although he could pass with his breasts bound, wanted to go further: 'Most women get suicidal at the thought of losing a breast,' he wrote of his own desire to do just that, 'to me, my enthusiasm and conviction that this is right are profound evidence of my transsexualism.'⁴³ By his account, the breast remained, in the 1990s, the primary positive sign of the female body. I want now to explore his suggestion that women

³⁸ Andrea Dworkin, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (New York, 1981); Andrea Dworkin & Catherine MacKinnon, *Pornography and Civil Rights: A New Day for Women's Equality* (Minneapolis, MN., 1988).

³⁹ Hewitt, *A Self-Made Man*, p.80.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p.8.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p.11.

⁴² Bernice Hausman, *Changing Sex: Transsexualism, Technology and the Idea of Gender* (Durham, NC., 1995), pp.110-140.

⁴³ Hewitt, *A Self-Made Man*, p.8.

who lose the breast sign would feel suicidal, asking whether men who considered themselves women (MTF transsexuals) felt as though they had 'lost' something.

The Most Visible Symbol

If FTM transsexuals felt that by removing their breasts they gave themselves a more convincingly male body then this perhaps begs two questions. Firstly, did non-transsexual women who lost breasts (to, say, cancer) feel that their body had become less female, or indeed, more male? Secondly, did MTF transsexuals place the same amount of stress upon the 'breasted' body as a female sex sign as did their FTM counterparts? It is possible to consider these two problems together, for in the area of breast-reconstruction and augmentation both biological women and MTF transsexuals were accessing the same register of sex-signs. As Kathy Davis writes, breast augmentation 'is a form of cosmetic surgery which is only performed on women – or transsexual men who want to become women – and, unlike breast reduction, it is done strictly for looks.'⁴⁴ Davis, though, is too dismissive here of things done 'strictly for looks' for it is the 'look' of a transsexual body which allows it to pass in public. Breast augmentation/creation surgery may be done strictly for the look, but it is a look which the transsexual in question needs to be accepted as a woman. Such acceptance and successful passing leads to the relief of considerable psychological pain in the transsexual subject. (This relief is, as Sander Gilman has argued, a facet of the therapeutic rationale developed as a response to accusations of 'vanity surgery' by aesthetic surgeons in the early twentieth century.⁴⁵) Davis, however, is correct to note how much social pressure this 'look' can create. 'In Western Culture,' she writes, 'breasts are probably the most visible symbol of femininity and, therefore central to women's identity and bodily self. More than any other body part, breasts are "up for judgement."⁴⁶ It was this 'judgement' which women (and MTF transsexuals) who underwent breast augmentation were trying to live up to. The criterion for success in this judgement was, as I want now to show, brutally simple throughout the twentieth century; without two acceptably sized breasts, one's femininity was at risk.

⁴⁴ Davis, *Reshaping the Female Body*, p.9.

⁴⁵ Gilman, *Making The Body Beautiful*, pp.3-41.

⁴⁶ Davis, *Reshaping the Female Body*, p.60.

Biological women who lost breasts (or who simply wanted larger ones) tended to revert to plastic surgeries to reconstruct their missing (or minimal) organs whilst MTFs, by contrast, made use in the first instance of series of estrogen-based hormonal treatments in order to 'grow' the breasts they were born without (although plastic surgery later on in the transition was not unusual). As both Haiken and Jacobson have pointed out, breast augmentation has historically been linked to prevailing ideas of female bodily appearance.⁴⁷ Haiken insists that the rise of augmentation surgeries was a response to that judgement of 'women have breasts.' This was clear, she says, even in the 1950s, when breast augmentation surgery truly took off, and when transsexual surgery first properly engaged wide public attention. She cites, for example, a 1956 article in *Cosmopolitan* which reported that 'emphasis in our society on the beautiful breast has become so extreme that there was little surprise in psychological circles when a teen-aged girl just recently committed suicide because she was flat-chested.'⁴⁸ Haiken, citing a medical journal, then shows that 'psychological circles' already had an explanation for this, 'Partly as a result of exposure to advertising propaganda and questionable publicity, many physically normal women develop an almost paralyzing self-consciousness focused on the feeling that they do not have the correct sized bosom.'⁴⁹ Although these psychologists were writing in the United States, their diagnosis applied equally to the United Kingdom, where precisely the same sort of advertising was common.⁵⁰ Jacobson argues that the public ubiquity of the 'hourglass figure of breasts and hips – the body of Jane Russell or Marilyn Monroe' lead to a medical (and cultural) 'pathologisation of variation' as far as breast size was concerned.⁵¹ What Haiken and Jacobson show is that great social pressure was brought to bear upon the ideal of the female body; pressure which pushed women who did not feel sufficiently 'breasted' towards surgery. Such images, from Haiken's 'sweater girls', through Britain's Page Three and America's *Playboy* centrefolds, from mid-century 'cheesecake' to Madonna's Jean-Paul Gaultier-designed conical bra, were

⁴⁷ Haiken, *Venus Envy*, pp. 235-270; Jacobson, *Cleavage*, pp.48-72.

⁴⁸ Cited in Haiken, *Venus Envy*, p.243.

⁴⁹ Cited in *Ibid.*, p.244. The full reference is Milton T. Edgerton & A. R. McClary, 'Augmentation Mammoplasty: Psychiatric Implications and Surgical Indications', *Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery* 21.4 (1958), pp279-300.

⁵⁰ Thessander, *The Feminine Ideal*, pp.160-173.

⁵¹ Jacobson, *Cleavage*, pp.71, 72.

cultural manifestations of the language of sex-distinction which women (and MTF transsexuals) who accessed these technologies were trying to speak.⁵²

Haiken, however, has further argued that women were not necessarily helpless in the face of this public language of the female body. She sees in the political activism of women who had lost a breast (or breasts) to cancer in the 1970s a form of conscious accommodation with the power of the breast as a sex sign. Taking their cues from the second-wave feminist movement of the time, these women sought to make both medical professionals and the wider public see that post-mastectomy plastic breast surgery was not an act of vanity, but a way of 'putting the experience of cancer behind them and begin life again with a reconstructed breast.'⁵³ The rationale behind needing a 'full complement' of breasts to live one's life was made clear by the title of one survival story of breast cancer and reconstructive surgery, Jean Zalon's *I Am Whole Again* (1975), which exposed the metonymic place of the breast in public ideals of the female body; the whole was reduced to the part. Women who lost breasts to cancer, such as the American journalist Betty Rolin, found that their 'incomplete' body shapes did not necessarily add up to their own body-images. Rolin's was nagged by the sense that her body was not speaking the right language. 'I no longer found *me* attractive,' she wrote in *First You Cry* (1976), 'I was damaged goods now and I knew it. For me feeling sexy had a lot to do with feeling beautiful. Those narcissistic feelings were short-circuited now. The fuse had blown.'⁵⁴ Missing a breast, Rolin felt that she was missing the sign of a female body. The notion of 'woman' was equated to the component reference, the breast. Thus in order to live 'as women' in societies which spoke this very particular language of sex-distinction women like Zalon and Rolin, through programs such as the American Cancer Society's 'Reach for Recovery', began to demand access to post-

⁵² Joanne Meyerowitz, 'Women, Cheesecake, and Borderline Material', *Journal of Women's History* 8.3 (1996), p.10. 'Cheesecake' denotes an attractive, typically young and 'busty' woman. It is the female equivalent of the male 'Beefcake', which is used to denote a particularly attractive, muscular man. Quite why these words both have dairy connotations is uncertain, but the contrast between 'beef' (slabs of muscle) and 'cheese' (a lactic product) has obviously gendered meanings. On the use of 'cheesecake' in Britain, see Marcus Collins, 'The Pornography of Permissiveness Men's Sexuality and Women's Emancipation in Mid Twentieth-Century Britain', *History Workshop Journal*, 47 (1999), p.100. On 'beefcake' in the USA, see the half-drama, half-documentary movie *Beefcake* (dir. Thom Fitzgerald, 1999).

⁵³ Haiken, *Venus Envy*, p.259.

⁵⁴ Betty Rolin, 'First You Cry', *Family Circle*, September (1976), p.122, cited in Haiken, *Venus Envy*, p.260.

mastectomy reconstructive breast surgery. Key to this demand was that it should not be seen as a vanity project, but rather as a therapeutic technology in itself.

Yet not all feminist women accepted this 'accommodation' with the signs of the breasted woman. In *The Cancer Journals* (1980), the poet Audre Lorde recounted her own battle with cancer and her eventual mastectomy. She was, she wrote, devastated to lose her breast, but she saw ultimately as a small price to pay. 'I would have paid more than even my beloved breast out of my body to preserve that self that was not merely physically defined.'⁵⁵ Here Lorde was making a conscious effort to deny the metonymy of breast-equals-woman. As a self-defined 'black lesbian feminist warrior poet' Lorde's entire artistic project was a struggle to develop a notion of 'woman' which was not limited to being a 'decoration and externally defined sex object.'⁵⁶ Lorde railed particularly against the use of prosthetic breasts to replace those lost to cancer, condemning them as 'masks' which would eventually lead towards the 'dangerous fantasy of reconstruction.'⁵⁷ Lorde cast it as a matter of function:

Usually prostheses serve a real function, to approximate the performance of a missing physical part. In other amputations and with other prosthetic devices, function is the main point of their existence. Artificial limbs perform specific tasks, allowing us to manipulate or walk. Dentures allow us to chew our food. Only false breasts are designed for appearances only, as if the only real functions of women's breasts were to appear in a certain shape and size and symmetry to onlookers or to yield to external pressure.⁵⁸

Different feminisms (and feminists) meant different approaches to the breast as sex sign. Lorde's radical approach, seeking to re-build 'woman' from the roots up, attempted to deny the breast its significant power. In contrast, more liberal approaches, such as Zalon's and Rolin's, aimed for women's ownership of the sign, rather than their thralldom to it. On both

⁵⁵ Audre Lorde, *The Cancer Journals* (San Francisco, CA., 1980), p.32.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p.60.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p.16.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p.63.

sides, however, it is possible to discern the very visible nature of the breast; its role as something to be looked at. Its place in the signification of 'woman', then, is perhaps a question of the gaze. It is the extent to which the subject is constituted as a woman by the public recognition of the breast which concerns those women who wrote about breast cancer. Both sides of the feminist argument comprehended the gaze but reacted to it differently. The liberal position is similar to the transsexual position; an acceptance that the common language of sexual difference expects women to have two breasts. Ironically, though, it was Lorde who struck upon a gazing concern that went beyond the experience of cancer: size.

The metonymic breast also made itself heard when, by accident of genetic heritage, the part was considered to be too small. In her 1970 guide to plastic surgery, *Beauty You can Buy*, author Harriet LaBarre wrote bluntly that in contemporary society 'the flat-chested woman or girl is made to feel inadequate, unwomanly.'⁵⁹ Of the two adjectives LaBarre used, 'unwomanly' should not come as a surprise. 'Inadequacy', on the other hand, is a fascinating (or perhaps disturbing) idea, one which raises the prospect of a body which, whilst not flat-chested or even missing a breast, only just passes muster as female, only just manages to signify woman. This movement in the languages of sex-distinction, from adequate signs to excellent ones, is the product of historical change, as Germaine Greer sees:

If you were disfigured in an accident, scarred by scalding or burning for example, you would accept cosmetic surgery to minimize the damage, no? Breast implants were first used to correct disfiguring anomalies of breast development, such as the failure of one breast to develop at all. We would not object to evening up breasts in such a case, but the criteria of unsatisfactoriness kept shifting until naturally small breasts are perceived by everyone to be a defect.⁶⁰

So who kept moving the goal-posts? Greer, not without some provocation, blames men, especially the plastic surgeons and media-workers who profited from the practice.

⁵⁹ Harriet LaBarre, *Plastic Surgery: Beauty You Can Buy* (New York, NY., 1970), p.79.

⁶⁰ Germaine Greer, *The Whole Woman* (London, 2000), p.39.

Underneath this surface capitalism, however, she also detects a 'sexual culture' responsible for the reduction of individuals to their erotic bodies. Historically, this was not novel to the second half of the twentieth century.⁶¹ What had changed by the time of the ever-bigger 'boob-job' was the level of visual communication present in the sexualised cultures of Britain and America into the 1960s and 1970s. It was not simply print advertising and soft-core porn that pushed this money-making metonymy, but mainstream cinema and television, too.⁶² The apogee of this may have been the late-1980s/early-1990s American life-guard drama, *Baywatch*, set in sunny, skimpy, LA beach country. With its regular cast of surgically-enhanced lifeguards reaching a worldwide audience of over one billion viewers at the show's peak, *Baywatch* perfectly crystallised the linkage between medical technologies and the 'breasted' idea of the female body. As cosmetic surgeon Dr Stephan Titlebaum reminisced of the show's biggest star, Pamela Anderson, 'We used to get people coming in to the clinic and asking for a "Pammie."⁶³ This, however, is not to make a reactionary judgement about the malign influence of television, but to recognise rather that television and other visual media were the shared spaces in which the public languages of sexual difference were transmitted and learnt. I want now to explore how MTF transsexuals responded to the significant power of the breast.

You Show Me Yours

The breast, as we have already seen in Mark Rees's FTM account, has particular resonance with adolescence and puberty. Unlike the penis or vagina which are present from birth, breasts or the lack thereof have very definite public significance in the division of the amorphous mass of children into adult men and women. And so, just as Rees despised the fact that his breasts grew in during adolescence, so did Caroline Cossey despair of their absence:

I was desperate to have breasts and convinced myself that they were growing. My nipples were larger and more sensitive than

⁶¹ Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York, NY., 1988), pp.28-52.

⁶² Meyerowitz, 'Women, Cheesecake, and Borderline Material,' p.2; Hall, *Sex, Gender, and Social Change*, p.173-4.

⁶³ Stephen Titlebaum, speaking in *Life After 'Baywatch'*, Five, 1 June 2003.

most boys' and I stuffed the top pocket of my school blazer with pens, pencils and erasers to create a "bust". I liked the sensation of weight, the feeling of movement against my chest.⁶⁴

This anecdote raises two central points about breasts in MTF discourse. Firstly that they served to distinguish the transsexual 'from most boys', that is to say, 'men', and secondly that they were seen as an easy 'add-on.' Just as Rees and Thompson feared that breasts would mark them out as women, so Cossey longed for them to do just that. Such was this longing that her childhood self was convinced that 'puppy fat' was in fact preliminary breast growth. In this self-delusion she was not alone. April Ashley, some twenty years before her in the 1940s, also thought that her chest was different to other boys. At the age of fifteen she had gone away to sea, in a last ditch-attempt to deny her female self, but even the hard physical labour did not appear to bring on the normal male development. 'With all the toil,' she recalled, 'I should have been developing male muscles, but I remained puppyish.' Thus, what could simply have been delayed puberty, or simply the fact that some men do *not* develop muscle as easily as others, was cast as a sign of femininity: 'Instead of the hard pectoral muscles which all the other sailors used to display as the bonuses of our physical labour, there was a pulpiness around my nipples which I took to be rudimentary breasts.'⁶⁵ In the hyper-masculine atmosphere of the merchant navy, Ashley simply did not fit in with her crewmates ('in public they were embarrassed by my effeminacy'), and thus sought out and perhaps created differences in her body to account for this, just as Cossey acknowledged her 'isolation from my peer group' with the advent of puberty.⁶⁶

Discussions of puberty, however, were not the only incidences in which age made an impact upon the role of the breasts in MTF autobiography. Both Jan Morris and Deirdre McCloskey changed sex considerably later on in life than Cossey and Ashley, and although some twenty or so years separate Morris's and McCloskey's transitions (early 1970s and mid 1990s) both took a somewhat ambivalent stance towards breasts in their autobiographies.

⁶⁴ Caroline Cossey, *My Story* (London, 1991), p.13.

⁶⁵ April Ashley, *Odyssey*, p.20.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p.19; Cossey, *My Story*, p.9.

McCloskey, for example, only once mentions breasts at all and never in connection with a long-held desire for them. In direct contrast to her willingness to dwell on matters genital, she writes only of 'three days of operations – face, breasts, and tummy tuck', with her narrative focusing far more upon the various bureaucratic delays to the operations rather than finally getting breasts.⁶⁷ It is interesting also, that McCloskey gave breasts no greater prominence than her feminine face-lift and liposuction. Indeed, later in the book her facial reconstruction gets an entire chapter to itself. It seems that she considered breasts no more important to passing as female than an acceptably womanly face and lower-body shape.⁶⁸ Clearly, this cannot have been due to some historic shift in the way breasts were viewed in public discourse; writing in the late 1990s she was exposed to the same imagery and eroticised 'women have breasts, men don't' equations as the breast-fixated FTM Paul Hewitt had been. Possibly, though, her equivocalness on breasts was a reflection of another part of that public conversation about the way women's bodies should look; a part which suggests that older, and particularly post-menopausal, women ought not to appear overtly sexualised.⁶⁹ Thus what was acceptable use of breasts as sex signs for the twenty-somethings Cossey and Ashley, was perhaps *outré* for the fifty-something McCloskey. Social position, too, may have played its part alongside age. McCloskey was President of the Economic History Association, whilst Ashley and Cossey both made their money by taking their clothes off in clubs. What was *de rigueur* in the strip joints of Paris may not have gone down so well in the seminar rooms of the University of Iowa. These two considerations, of place and lifetime, may also explain Jan Morris's unwillingness to dwell on the issue to hand. She writes just once that hormone treatments have caused her whole body shape to change, to become 'more feminine... My waist narrowed, my hips broadened rather, and my small breasts blossomed like blushes.'⁷⁰ Morris was keen to record that her body had become softer, with less 'leatheriness' and 'hard protrusion', a change which enabled her to pass as a woman in that New York City Airport queue. But she did not cite her breasts as having much other bearing

⁶⁷ McCloskey, *Crossing*, p.125.

⁶⁸ In fact she lists 'your face, your gestures, voice...' when noting the things people are able to notice most in public. *Ibid.*, p.190.

⁶⁹ McCloskey, in fact, calls herself a 'woman on hormone replacement therapy' after her penectomy and vaginoplasty. *Ibid.*, p.198. See also Germaine Greer, *The Change: Women, Ageing and the Menopause* (London, 1992).

⁷⁰ Jan Morris, *Conundrum* (London, 1974), pp.94-95.

on her public status as a woman. She was, as I noted in the previous chapter, ready to write at length about her penis (if only, ultimately, to dismiss it), so why so little about the breasts? Like McCloskey, Morris underwent her hormone treatments and operations much later on in life than Cossey and Ashley, between her late forties and early fifties. In the decades with which these years of Morris's life coincided (the late 1960s and early 1970s), it would not have been deemed appropriate for an older woman to draw attention to her breasts. Despite all the liberalisation and censorship-lifting that did occur at this time, the acceptability of the public breast was, as Greer points out, seemingly exclusive to lithe, firm, youthful bodies.⁷¹ Morris's professional life must also have had its impact. How could an acclaimed travel writer have been taken entirely seriously if she kept talking about her breasts? (As I will show in Chapter Four, this did actually become an issue for some of Morris's critics.) We may be able to conclude from this that, although the breast may indeed have taken on increased public visibility during the second half of the twentieth century, it was a very particular sort of breast which did so, and thus a very particular type of female body which it connoted: young, sexy and malleable. Yet as Greer judges of women's breasts outside of the realms of advertising, pornography and *Baywatch*, 'almost none are the standard shape.'⁷²

Tell that, though, to Caroline Cossey. 'My breasts,' she wrote when recalling the cosmetic surgery she underwent, 'were perfect.' This perfection was achieved not just in their texture and shape, 'soft and gently rounded', but in their natural appearance, too, for 'they seemed in no way artificial.'⁷³ When later she had her vaginoplasty, Cossey declared that 'I didn't feel that much more "female" because I had a vagina'. Yet upon first seeing her newly breasted self in the hospital mirror, the equation was clear. 'In the reflection I saw the woman I had always believed myself to be.'⁷⁴ April Ashley, on the other hand, had a slightly different sort of mirror in which to view her feminine reflection. On a beach in San Tropez sometime in the early 1970s, she was approached by 'a boy in white (who) turned out to be a girl, one of France's top tennis stars.' This sportswoman, upon being told Ashley's identity, said, "I don't believe you are April Ashley." To which the ever-unflappable Ashley responded, "And I don't

⁷¹ Greer, *The Whole Woman*, p.39.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p.58.

⁷³ Cossey, *My Story*, p.51.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.103, 51.

believe you're a woman – show me your tits." – "Only if you show me yours," agreed the tennis star. Thus, at their table 'in the best restaurant in town... we unwrapped our respective bosoms and satisfied each other's curiosity.'⁷⁵ And yet, whilst in this instance a highly public conversation about breasts and femininity served to help Ashley pass, in other situations it could be used against her to cruel effect. Having moved to Hay-on-Wye (and deposing, for a few years, the literary festival as the town's most notable feature) she was relentlessly teased by a gang of teenaged boys, who would shout "Look at her! Are your tits real?"⁷⁶ They, much like the French tennis star, focused upon Ashley's breasts when questioning her position as a woman. Neither demanded 'Is your vagina real?', not simply because of propriety (which had its place, even in abusive name-calling) but because of the relationship between the publicly visible 'neo breast' and the technology underpinning it.

As I suggested with Caroline Cossey's fake bust of pencils and erasers in her blazer pocket, there has been a tendency to view breasts as something that may be added to the body at will. It was the apparent ease of breast enhancement/creation which, when coupled with the transsexual desire to signify the public image of a woman, which gave rise to this view. Cossey herself intertwined these issues when recounting her own attempts to gain breasts. 'Since adolescence,' she wrote, marking again the links between puberty and public sex-distinction, 'when I had so envied the development of my sister and her friends, I had wanted breasts. My nipples had always been large and sensitive, but it was obvious that my breasts were not going to grow on their own.'⁷⁷ This realisation was for Cossey the point at which medical technology could then intervene to enable her bodily transformation. The thought process was relatively simple: if her own body would not give her what she wanted she would find something that could. 'The excitement I felt,' she noted of the night she made the decision to present her transsexuality to a doctor, 'was difficult to describe. "I may not be a fully functioning female" I thought, "but at least I can look like one."⁷⁸ 'Fully-functioning' was a reference to the inability of medical science to implant or create wombs-and-ovaries in MTF

⁷⁵ Ashley, *Odyssey*, p.245. That Ashley does not name the tennis player is quite out of character. No-one else of any note who ever approached her, from Elvis Presley to Omar Sharif, has their name neglected in the book.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p.272.

⁷⁷ Cossey, *My Story*, p.33.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

transsexuals. Thus for Cossey to 'look like one' meant having breasts which would enable her to pass both fully clothed and when she worked as a stripper. The apparent ease with which a transsexual could 'look like one' and gain breasts (easy, at least, in comparison with removing their penis) was manifested in one of the technologies employed for the purpose: a course of estrogen hormone therapy administered by tablets.⁷⁹

According to the Harry Benjamin, the pioneer of transsexual medical treatment, estrogen 'in sufficient dosage, over a sufficient length of time, acts on the male body in two ways. It produces partial chemical castration and hormonal feminization. Both are temporary results unless the treatment is continued for years.'⁸⁰ Even though hormone treatment did take time, it was a distinctly pain-free form of medical intervention which gave a lot for a little. 'Foremost among the side effects (of hormonal feminization)', continued Benjamin, 'is breast development, the appearance of which provides tremendous emotional relief to the transsexual patient.'⁸¹ Cossey was 'delighted' to notice her breasts growing, but 'it was psychologically that the hormone tablets made the greatest difference. Taking them brought me closer to my goal and with every passing day I felt more feminine and at ease with the world.'⁸² Jan Morris, too, noted the psychological effects of the hormonal treatments (prescribed for her by Benjamin himself), aware that to start upon them was to change her life entirely. 'The sex hormones had been identified,' she wrote 'and even without surgery the secondary sex characteristics could be induced – beards in women, breasts in men, delicacy on the one side, muscles on the other.'⁸³ This was precisely what she was looking for – 'it sounded like magic to me!'⁸⁴ When she began her course of hormone tablets, however, she called the changes 'infinitely gradual', a frustration echoed by both April Ashley ('estrogen

⁷⁹ In *Testosterone Dreams*, John Hoberman also discusses the mid-twentieth century interest in estrogen, including a question apparently often asked of doctors at the time; 'Was there a hormone therapy to increase the size of a woman's breasts?'. See John Hoberman, *Testosterone Dreams: Rejuvenation, Aphrodisia, Doping* (Los Angeles, CA., 2005), p.76. As Bernice Hausman points out, estrogen has been administered via ovarian grafts since the early 1930s, and also has the stated aim not simply of growing the patient's breasts, but of 'softening' their bodily form in general, and thus helping it to 'match' the patient's supposedly feminine gender identity. See Hausman, *Changing Sex*, pp.16, 41.

⁸⁰ Benjamin, *The Transsexual Phenomenon*, p.92.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² Cossey, *My Story*, p.35.

⁸³ Morris, *Conundrum*, p.42.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p.43.

must affect people differently, because my breasts never amounted to much') and Caroline Cossey ('my breasts were nowhere near large enough to impress an audience').⁸⁵ Ashley, according to Harry Benjamin at least, was right. 'The degree of gynomastia that may be achieved,' he wrote (giving artificially-induced breast-growth its scientific name⁸⁶) 'is dependent upon the patient's constitutional physical build,' but 'it may take months, even a couple of years, to develop a breast that would resemble that of an average normal human female.'⁸⁷ He never explained what he meant by 'normal'.

Whilst most transitions from male to female (and vice-versa) did take 'a couple of years' (with the genital operation in particular often seeming almost indefinitely deferred in the autobiographies) this did not stop some MTF transsexuals from doing all they could to hurry the process along, especially when it came to something as apparently simple as adding-on breasts. 'Frequently,' wrote Benjamin, 'transsexuals are impatient and insist upon quicker results through breast surgery with implants of various kinds. The outcomes are not always satisfactory.'⁸⁸ He was writing in the mid-1960s when the technology of breast augmentation surgery, though not new, was still an uncertain procedure, as April Ashley well knew. 'There are dangers, of course,' she admitted when musing on the 'remarkable' things doctors could do with plastic surgery. 'One Paris doctor, known as the "tit man" killed someone with a silicone needle. It pierced the heart.'⁸⁹ Ashley's story serves as a rather extreme example of the limitations of medical technology, even in the add-on world of breasts. Benjamin listed the more common problems: 'I have seen bad infections develop, painful and abnormally hard breasts,' but also admitted that he had seen 'satisfactory results that helped the patient's emotional status.'⁹⁰ For these transsexuals, the potential dangers of augmentation surgery –

⁸⁵ Ibid., p.92; Ashley, *Odyssey*, p. 53; Cossey, *My Story*, p.40.

⁸⁶ In later literature, 'gynomastia' is sometimes spelt 'gynaemastia' or 'gynacomastia'. See: Gilman, *Making the Body Beautiful*, pp.260-263.

⁸⁷ Benjamin, *The Transsexual Phenomenon*, pp.92-93.

⁸⁸ Ibid., p.93.

⁸⁹ Ashley, *Odyssey*, p.78. On the historical development of augmentation surgery, see Haiken, *Venus Envy*, pp.235-245; Jacobson, *Cleavage*, pp.73-105.

⁹⁰ Benjamin, *The Transsexual Phenomenon*, p.93.

not least the painful irony of breast cancer (and possible mastectomy) – were far outweighed by the sex signifying benefits.⁹¹

Just as FTM accounts of breast removal can be compared to the way in which victims of breast cancer viewed their femininity, so can MTF accounts of augmentation be paralleled with the rather more unusual cases of biological men who, against their will, grew breasts. Sander Gilman notes that 'male breasts are caused by the body's estrogen reaction to testosterone onslaught.'⁹² This can happen because of a genetic defect in biological men, but the social group most likely to suffer from involuntary gynomastia are drug-using bodybuilders, whose often massive abuse of testosterone-based anabolic steroids results in revolt by their own gonads. Very simply, too much testosterone artificially introduced into the body means that the body produces excess estrogen in an attempt to strike a balance. It was medical technology (specifically physiology, nutrition, psychology and, particularly, chemistry) which permitted bodybuilders to attain the truly huge physiques which have graced the front covers of magazines such as *Flex*, *Muscle & Fitness* and *Ironman* since the late 1960s.⁹³ It is the application of the chemical steroid technologies which leads to gynomastia, or, as it is known in the argot of bodybuilders, 'bitch-tits.' The 'reformed' bodybuilder Sam Fussell, whose autobiography *Muscle* (1991) was an ironic account of the lengths he and his fellow 'iron-heads' went to achieve their enormous musculatures, noted the anxiety which the condition caused in steroid users:

My room-mate Joey had gotten bitch-tits a few years back, when he had first gone on the "juice" and so I was kind of worried about it myself. I knew of dozens of competitive builders whose careers had been ruined by the sudden need for a bra. After a few weeks on steroids I was checking my pecs in the mirror daily – and not just to

⁹¹ On the various illnesses linked to silicone injections/implants, see Jacobson, *Cleavage*, pp.144-170. The

⁹² Gilman, *Making the Body Beautiful*, p.260.

⁹³ Dan O'Connor, 'Alien Bodies: Bodybuilding, Abjection, and the Ideal of the Modern Body', Unpublished MA Thesis, University of Warwick, 2002, pp. 32-42.

see how tight they were after working out. Fortunately, there didn't seem to be any trace of the tell-tale soft bump.⁹⁴

Fussell's concern manifested itself in strictly female terms. Firstly the metonymic 'sudden need to wear a bra' has parallels with horrified FTM accounts of puberty. Secondly, the anxious checking for soft bumps brings up stereotyped images of the idealised, youthful breast. Most importantly, however, is the colloquial name of the condition, 'bitch-tits'. The term is derogatively feminine, connoting submission and sexual servitude through 'bitch' and objectification of the female body through 'tits'. Highlighted here is the point at which the specific femininity of breasts (as contrasted with the vagina) is made negative by dint of that very specificity. So closely connected to cultural ideas of woman are breasts that, inevitably, they take on some damaging cultural ideas; in this case, submissiveness, objectification and sexual reception. Nevertheless, it is was in working out at the gym, and in taking courses of male hormones, that some FTM transsexuals hoped to develop a suitably man-signifying physique. I want now to examine the ways this is negotiated in their autobiographies.

As Much a Man as Sly Stallone

Harry Benjamin wrote that the use of 'androgen injections' (male hormones) in the treatment of FTM transsexuals could be done 'to the point of suppressing menstrual periods' in patients.⁹⁵ He had earlier suggested that 'menstruation constitutes a psychological trauma to the female TS' which, whilst true clinically, is not an issue that is dwelt on in FTM autobiography (Raymond Thompson is the only one who even elides it, but he will not even *name* menstruation as a physiological process he used to go through).⁹⁶ To Benjamin the other results of taking androgens are merely 'masculinising side effects' which whilst 'likewise helpful for the patient's emotional balance' are nevertheless still functions, rather than primary aims of hormone therapy.⁹⁷ However, within FTM autobiography these 'side effects' take on considerably more importance than Benjamin granted them. In the prologue to his life story

⁹⁴ Sam Fussell, *Muscle: Confessions of an Unlikely Bodybuilder* (London, 1991), p.164.

⁹⁵ Benjamin, *The Transsexual Phenomenon*, p.154.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.* p.150; Thompson, *What Took You So Long?* p.54.

⁹⁷ Benjamin, *The Transsexual Phenomenon*, p.155.

Paul Hewitt, for example, accepted that although his 'dream could never be biologically realised' in so far as he would always have XX chromosomes, he had 'a beard, more body hair than many natural born males and thick muscles.'⁹⁸ Asserting his place in the male community of bodies, Hewitt looked not to his penis (and all the dangerous plastic surgery he was so worried about) but to the hairy, muscular 'side-effects' of his testosterone hormone treatments. Just as having breasts was a publicly acceptable way for an MTF's body to say 'I am a woman', so was having visible body hair and defined muscles a way of saying 'I am a man' without reverting to the inappropriate genital distinction.

Nevertheless, body hair and muscles were as susceptible to historical and cultural contingency as breasts were. The 'toned' muscular body, for example, was an strong signifier of masculinity throughout the period in question. In their book, *The Adonis Complex* (2000), Harrison Pope, Katharine Phillips and Roberto Olivardia suggest that it is only in the past thirty or so years that this particular 'six-pack abs' ideal has made its way into popular culture. Their work, an effort to confront 'body image disorder' in men and boys, is a product of the 'masculinity in crisis' movement which first emerged in the 1990s.⁹⁹ They suggest that in the increasing absence of traditionally male social roles (due in part to the collapse of heavy manufacturing in the West, the sexual revolution, and second wave feminism), the muscular body has become a more reliable way indicating masculinity and manhood without being arrested for public indecency. 'Muscular men and bodies,' they suggest, 'are considered more masculine... becoming strong and masculine is a clear way for men to radiate power and manliness... Muscles are *the* sign of masculinity.'¹⁰⁰ This connotation of 'muscle' and 'male' is grounded in both their linkages with ideas of power, strength and dominance. If you can show muscle, you are indicating masculinity. One does not need fully to embrace the idea of masculinity in crisis (there remains the male/female pay gap, the increasing assault on the right to choose in the United States, and the overwhelming under-representation of women in

⁹⁸ Hewitt, *A Self-Made Man*, p.4.

⁹⁹ See also, Susan Faludi, *Stiffed: The Betrayal of Modern Man* (New York, NY., 1999); Lynne Segal, *Slow Motion: Changing Masculinities, Changing Men* (London, 1999).

¹⁰⁰ Harrison G. Pope Jr., Katharine A. Phillips & Roberto Olivardia, *The Adonis Complex: How to Identify, Treat and Prevent Body Obsession in Men and Boys* (New York, 2000), p.53.

the parliaments of most Western democracies¹⁰¹) to acknowledge that 'muscle=man' is another very potent equation. The increased usage of the sexualised, muscular male body in advertising, film and television from the 1970s onwards is also undeniable, and can be seen as a younger brother of the idealised 'breasted' female body I discussed above.¹⁰²

It is hardly surprising to note, then, that some FTMs who grew up in the last thirty years or so of the twentieth century tended to aspire towards this very publicly male body shape. 'I feel as much a man as Sly Stallone – though rather more articulate,' joked Paul Hewitt, introducing what was to be a constant theme throughout his autobiography: the quest for a muscular, manly body. To achieve this he, like most other FTMs, underwent a course of testosterone injections. 'What are the unwanted side-effects to the female Eastern-bloc athlete,' he explained, conjuring up images of the notorious Russian sisters Irina and Tamara Press (more of whom in Chapter Six), 'are exactly the effects I am looking for.'¹⁰³ (Note that it is 'effects' not 'side effects'.) Sometime before his first steroid injection, Hewitt had begun working out in the gym, and once on the hormones, he (like thousands of bodybuilders and athletes before him) could soon see the difference. Once more he made a pop-cultural joke. 'I have set my heart on having pecs like Arnold Schwarzenegger's'; a crack closer to the bone than he perhaps realised, for the only way 'Arnie' ever got as huge as he did was via the magic of anabolic steroids.¹⁰⁴ Hewitt's jokes about his burgeoning masculine figure are also interesting in that they are reliant upon two very famous examples of excessive muscularity. FTMs like Hewitt were aiming not for the sixty-four inch chest of Schwarzenegger at his competitive prime, nor for the twenty-inch biceps of Stallone in the movies *Rocky* (1976) or *Rambo* (1982), but used them instead as extreme examples of what they were trying to achieve. Raymond Thompson also enjoyed the benefits of androgenic hormonal therapy and used not simply the results of his weight-training to mark him out as a man, but the activity

¹⁰¹ The Scandinavian democracies have long prided themselves on high female representation in their parliaments, with both Sweden and Norway having counts of over 40% since the early 1980s. However, neither of these two bastions of progressive politics has yet achieved the feat of the Welsh Assembly which returned exactly 50% women members in the May 2003 elections.

¹⁰² Kenneth Dutton, *The Perfectible Body: The Western Ideal of Physical Perfection* (London, 1995), pp.229-271.

¹⁰³ Hewitt, *A Self-Made Man*, p.20.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p.76

itself. Thompson began lifting weights whilst in a women's prison (where he was, at his doctor's behest, still permitted to take the tablets). 'On association,' he wrote about the free time allowed to inmates, 'we would go to the gym. I would work on the weights and Loretta (his lover) would go straight for the trampoline.' The distinction is clear, particularly coming almost immediately after (the pre-operative) Thompson described his and Loretta's sexual relationship: 'Lying on top of her, the sensations were entirely those of being a man.'¹⁰⁵ Men are dominant and do weights, is the inference, and women are submissive and bounce on trampolines. Lifting weights and getting 'quite fit and strong from exercise' however, was something of a double-edged sword for Thompson. Whilst his newly developed musculature did allow him to pass more easily as a man, it also nearly scuppered his attempts to have the phalloplastic operation. His weight-training had left him 'so trim that I did not have enough skin around my stomach to form a flap' to be pedicled onto the groin area. It is a measure of just how much his 'manly' physique meant to him that Thompson was avowedly 'perturbed at the idea of putting on weight' as this would 'invariably increase my discomfort with my physical form'; even when putting on this fat, which he clearly viewed as feminine, would enable him to create a penis.¹⁰⁶ Yet though the body-built was a strong signifier of masculinity, it was not an automatic product of androgenic hormonal treatments. It takes a great deal of work in the gym, too, as both Hewitt and Thompson would surely testify. The energy expended on the pursuit of this unquestionably masculine body serves in the autobiographies as one more piece of evidence as to just how much transsexuals truly desire to change their sex. Other results of hormone therapy were not quite so difficult to come by.

A Useful Vehicle for Signification

Caroline Walker Bynum described much historical writing of the last twenty years as 'all the fuss about the body', and indeed, there is scarcely any body part that has not found itself the object of some historical analysis.¹⁰⁷ From the eyes to the anus and from the pelvis to the penis, stories about bodies of the past might be said to have become 'fashionable to the point

¹⁰⁵ Thompson, *What Took You So Long?* p.108.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p.262.

¹⁰⁷ Caroline Walker Bynum, 'Why all the Fuss About the Body? A Medievalist's View', *Critical Inquiry* 22 (1995), pp.1-33.

of ubiquity.¹⁰⁸ Yet in amongst this strangely disembodied corpus of corpses there seems to have been little room for body hair. This may be because body hair is not an identifiable body *part* as such, more a collection of parts. Even in the fields of sociology and anthropology, where the study of body modification has been long established, investigation of body hair has found few takers.¹⁰⁹ In a rare article dealing with the subject, Susan Basow identified the 'norm of the hairless woman'. This norm, achieved through regular rituals of shaving, depilating and waxing primarily serves, she suggests, 'to exaggerate the differences between men and women.'¹¹⁰ Whilst by nature both men *and* women have some extent of body hair (beyond that which covers their heads), in Western cultures, women are expected to have little or none. Another binary equation hovers on the horizon: men have hair, women don't. 'Hair on women's bodies,' confirms Alice Macdonald, 'on their underarms, legs, faces, indeed anywhere other than on their scalps, has been seen as unfeminine and in need of removal.'¹¹¹ It follows then, in the same logic that powered the 'scientific fact that men have a penis' and the notion that the breast is 'defined by its role as a sign of femininity', that the growth of body hair is seen as 'masculine'. Both FTM and MTF transsexuals followed this latest equation, aware that:

Hair provides societies with a useful vehicle for signification...
 (which is) explained by its mutability. For like other "natural"
 aspects of the body, like muscles or facial features, hair is just
 organic matter produced by physical processes, it has the added
 quality of being malleable – of being easy to change, which

¹⁰⁸ Mark Jenner & Bertrand Taithe, 'The Historiographical Body' in Cooter & Pickstone (eds), *Companion to Medicine in the Twentieth Century* (London, 2000) p.187. See, for example, James Masten, 'Is the Fundament a Grave?' in David Hillman & Carla Mazzio (eds), *The Body in Parts: Fantasies of Corporeality in Early Modern Europe* (London, 1997) pp.129-146; Fiona Giles, 'The Tears of Lacteros: Integrating the Meanings of the Human Breast' in Christopher E. Forth & Ivan Crozier (eds), *Body Parts: Critical Engagements With Corporeality* (Lanham, MD., 2005), pp.123-141.

¹⁰⁹ For example, there is nothing on hair in Mike Featherstone (ed.), *Body Modification* (London, 2000); nor in Victoria Pitts, *In the Flesh: The Cultural Politics of Body Modification* (London, 2003).

¹¹⁰ Susan A. Basow, 'The Hairless Ideal: Women and Their Body Hair', *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 15 (1991), p.86, cited in Alice Macdonald, 'Hair-Razing. Female Body Hair: Threat, Transgression and Taboo', Unpublished MA Thesis, University of Warwick (1999), p.7.

¹¹¹ Macdonald, 'Hair-Razing', pp.11-12.

makes it a sensitive medium for expression and cultural signification – psychological, spiritual and sexual.¹¹²

Facial hair, more so than chest, arm or leg hair, has invariably served as an instant public signifier of 'man'. In this case 'male' is not enough, for like breasts in the female case, facial hair comes with the advent of puberty, acting thus as a herald of the change from boy to man. Whilst a penis would serve to identify any human of any age as a male, it is only adult or adolescent males who have access to facial hair as a sexual signifier. Raymond Thompson, for example, described his experience of facial hair thus:

I had always had dark hair on my upper lip, but it had thickened into a respectable moustache and hairs were starting to grow along my jaw... it was a necessary process I had to go through... it was the same as going through puberty. To me it was like a natural progression from boyhood to manhood.¹¹³

This age-conscious sexual signification was put to interesting work by the English FTM Mark Rees and the American Mario Martino, both of whom transitioned somewhat later on in life than Thompson. Rather than actually writing about the growth of their facial hair, Rees and Martino both made use of photography in their autobiographies. On the front cover of his *Dear Sir or Madam*, Rees is pictured in portrait with a full beard. The subtitle – *the autobiography of a female to male transsexual* – is printed small at the bottom of the page, but it matters not, for with that beard there is no question that this is a book about a man. It speaks the public language of sexual distinction as clearly as possible for the shelves of respectable bookstores. Similarly Martino includes at the end of his story a photograph of himself, seated at his writing desk, smoking an old-fashioned pipe through a full beard. The caption reads 'Emergence accomplished, at last I'm free to live as I wish and to tell my story.' As Jay Prosser has noted, this photo, taken at 'an awkward angle to the rear of the subject's right

¹¹² Ibid., p.17.

¹¹³ Thompson, *What Took You So Long?* p.117

shoulder... masks Martino's identity as it evidences his manhood.'¹¹⁴ Martino, as we know, wrote under a pseudonym, but even with his back to us, his face slightly obscured by shadows and light, the beard speaks for his maleness as nothing else in the picture (even the pipe) could. The photo is, as Prosser suggests, aimed at hiding the 'true' identity of the author away, but it is also an attempt to say that whoever Mario Martino may turn out to be, we at least know he is a man.

This 'bearded' state, however, would perhaps not have been appropriate for either Raymond Thompson or Paul Hewitt, both because of their age and the influence of contemporary fashions. Martino and Rees transitioned later on in their lives than Hewitt and Thompson, and also earlier in the twentieth century. What was a common sign of masculinity in the 1960s (when Martino and Rees had their adolescence) had declined in popularity by the late 1970s and early 1980s (the time of Thompson and Hewitt going through puberty). Beards simply declined in popularity in the final two decades of the century, as evinced by the massive growth in male grooming products centred upon shaving. Similarly, their comparative youth mitigated against the adoption of a full beard for Thompson and Hewitt. What may have been cool for young hippies in the Summer of Love was distinctly *outré* by the clean-cut 1980s. Thus Thompson went for a clipped moustache, and Hewitt was merely happy to report how regularly he needed to shave. Once again the age issue seems to have forced different focuses on body hair amongst transsexual autobiographers. Young, and only just out of their 'first' adolescence, both Hewitt and Thompson are almost childishly excited by the onset of their 'real' pubertal development. Hewitt wrote:

Jumping Jehovah's Witnesses! I've just looked down at my chest and noticed a long, lone hair growing there! It is pale brown, fine and with a slight curl. He looks like a single ear of corn on a fallow field. I have

¹¹⁴ Jay Prosser, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality* (New York, NY., 1998), p.207.

named him Bob, my one hair. He is an early pioneer on barren female skin and has great sentimental value.¹¹⁵

Thompson was similarly delighted. 'For years I had two strands of hair growing out of my chest, and I was really fond and proud of these two hairs. Soon they were being joined by others and there was quite a crop of them.'¹¹⁶ However, just as it would have been culturally unseemly for Jan Morris to start crowing about her breasts, so it seems that Rees and Martino were less vocal about this evidence of their 'virile' masculinity. Such boyish delight in these adolescent signs would have been inappropriate for the middle-aged men they were trying to pass as.

The hairy body as male, however, is only one side of an equation suggested by Susan Basow's exposure of the 'norm of the hairless woman' and, just as surely as FTMs aimed to appropriate male body-hair, so did MTFs aim to remove it, or to deny they ever had it at all. Again, puberty was central to some accounts of transsexual body hair. 'At fifteen,' recalled April Ashley, 'I had no facial or pubic hair, my voice hadn't broken, I was not overwhelmed by sexual desire, and I hadn't shot up. By contrast, my contemporaries were hulking brutes covered in fluff.'¹¹⁷ Just as she had used her 'pulpy' chest to suggest a pre-operative womanliness, so she used the late onset of adolescent change to distance herself bodily from her unquestionably male schoolmates. Caroline Cossey was even more explicit about it. 'It was in sports that I suffered the most,' she noted of her schooldays, 'the other boys had begun to develop hairy chests, but I stayed smooth and girlish. In the changing rooms I was pushed and shoved.'¹¹⁸ She went on to use this pariah status as a way of fantasising herself into a feminine role. 'Teased by the other boys about my lack of body hair... I liked to imagine

¹¹⁵ Hewitt, *A Self-Made Man*, p.79. It is interesting that here, Hewitt still considers his skin to be female, yet considers himself a man. Jay Prosser suggests that much transsexual autobiography relies upon repeated metaphors of 'alienation from... a false skin' – a sense of being 'trapped in the wrong body'. Hewitt's phrasing here seems to go further than this. The idea of a 'pioneer' suggests a journey (to manhood) which he is in the process of completing. Hewitt is escaping from his alien skin, from the female body he no longer recognises. See: Prosser, *Second Skins*, pp.68-69.

¹¹⁶ Thompson, *What Took You So Long?* p.117.

¹¹⁷ Ashley, *Odyssey*, p.10.

¹¹⁸ Cossey, *My Story*, p.7.

that men were admiring my long hairless legs.'¹¹⁹ This dream would, of course, come true years later when Cossey became a stripper and, later still, a glamour model and a Bond girl. Both Cossey and Ashley came from an generation of transsexuals who were often keen to ascribe biological causes to their condition; a function of their efforts to ensure that their then extremely novel lives did not appear to be frivolous choices, but rather solutions to unavoidable problems. This perhaps explains their frequent reversion to stories in which they always seemed more female than male, even before a diagnosis of transsexuality.¹²⁰ Indeed Ashley made much of the physical evaluation made of her by a doctor when she was in a psychiatric hospital (for attempted suicide) as a teen. 'The report noted... *he presents a womanish appearance and has little bodily or facial hair.*'¹²¹ Long before any sort of operation or treatments to create breasts (or indeed a vagina), Ashley is implying, she was obviously of female bodily appearance to even the most skilled of biological observers. In the cases of Cossey and Ashley we see neat reversals of the stories told by Paul Hewitt and Raymond Thompson. The two men positively revelled in the onset of male adolescent change in their bodies (even if it did come perhaps ten years later than they might have wished) whilst the two women did everything in their narrative power to deny that it even happened at all.

Such is the weight placed upon even a secondary sex-sign like body hair by MTF that some were willing to spend small fortunes having it removed. Deirdre McCloskey, whose previous life as Donald was too well documented in photographs of him as a bearded University Professor for her to adopt Cossey and Ashley's denial tactics, flew herself from Iowa to Texas in order to attend a specialist clinic called Electrology 2000 where, over several visits, she would spend several thousand dollars on intensive courses of electrolysis.¹²² Each hair, she noted, had to be individually lasered away; an expensive treatment but one whose success was a product of intense demand, not simply from MTF transsexuals, but from biological women, also, keen to live up to the hairless ideal demanded of them. Just as the phalloplastic operation became much more viable towards the end of the twentieth century as a result of increased (FTM) demand twinned with expanding (non-transsexual) interest in

¹¹⁹ Ibid., p.12.

¹²⁰ On which, see Meyerowitz, *Changing Sex*, pp.168-207.

¹²¹ Ashley, *Odyssey*, p.32.

¹²² McCloskey, *Crossing*, pp.121-122.

male genital health, so were the medical technologies available for the successful management of secondary sex signs in transsexuals more the products of wider social pressures than just the desire to change sex. If anything, the technologies of breast augmentation and muscle growth are the products of non-transsexual individuals (models, bodybuilders) wishing to *affirm* their sex, to signify themselves more clearly as men or women. Perhaps even more so than the technologies of genital surgery, which were almost exclusively demanded by people who changed sex, those aimed at the regulation of secondary sex-signs such as breasts and body hair perhaps point to the ways in which transsexuality, as an identity which literally must inscribe itself upon the body, was dependent upon public discourses far more common than transsexuality itself. Transsexuality was not so much an independent sub-culture as a representation of the sexual order it was so often seen as undermining. Twentieth-century Britain and America were both possessed of a popular culture in which the male/female divide was one of, if not *the*, most important descriptive binaries. It was the non-transsexual demand for medical procedures which enhanced these binaries which in turn provided transsexuals with whole professions dedicated to these procedures. Transsexual demand alone would perhaps not have been enough to encourage the legions of electrolysis technicians, cosmetic surgeons, physical trainers and beauticians, to whose expertise and success they had access. But then, it was not merely transsexuals who had to pass as men and women in public; so too did born men and women feel the pressure to signify their sex convincingly. It is easy to forget that the 'finished products' that transsexuals were aiming at as they shaved, plucked, worked out, and padded their bras, were not naturally-occurring phenomena, but social constructions centuries in the making. Furthermore, transsexuals, just like the men and women they considered themselves to be, had to carry on shaving, plucking, lifting and padding throughout their lives, for secondary sex signification was (and is) a continual project. Unlike a removed penis, hair grows back. At the beginning of this chapter I called secondary sex signs 'everyday' signifiers of man and woman, and that is just what they are: a semiotic register that must be constantly adjusted by everyone – transsexual or not – in order to pass.

Chapter Three

Intercourses #1: Sex and Sexuality in Transsexual Autobiography

Sex Circuits

It was the First of November, 1993, a Monday, when, 'for the first time ever,' Paul Hewitt felt 'completely sexually fulfilled and satiated.' In his autobiography, *A Self-Made Man* (1995), he attributed this wonderful and novel feeling to his new girlfriend, Sarah, 'a woman who treats me completely as a male, not as the woman I have left behind.'¹ Being with Sarah, having a happy heterosexual relationship with a woman, was of central importance to Hewitt's sense of himself as a man. Key to this, he considered, was the sex act itself, 'I am always the dominant, aggressive force in bed. I like to enjoy total control. Most men keep their brains in their underpants, but its not their fault. I blame it on the testosterone. The brain has little control over the magnetic forces of nature.'²

Perhaps the men whom Leslie Townsend remembered dancing for in early 1990s Houston, Texas, would have agreed with Hewitt's analysis as they watched her strip and 'yelled at me to "take it off." Townsend herself certainly would. 'If men looked at me,' she wrote in *Hidden in Plain Sight* (2002), 'I was a woman. If men lusted after me, I was a woman. If men slept with me, I was a woman. These mental tapes seemed to be on auto-replay in my head. It's how I learned to feed my ego.'³ These two incidents, roughly contemporaneous yet separated by miles of salt water, highlight how in transsexual autobiography heterosexuality and the traditional gender roles of active-male and passive-female are used as socially potent sex signs. Sleeping with a woman made Paul Hewitt a man, as did his sexual dominance and phallic thought processes. Sleeping with men made Leslie Townsend a woman, as did her sexual passivity in being stared at, desired as the object of a male gaze.

¹ Paul Hewitt with Jane Warren, *A Self-Made Man: the Diary of a Man Born in a Woman's Body* (London, 1995), p.70.

² Ibid.

³ Leslie Townsend, *Hidden in Plain Sight* (San José, TX., 2002), p.98.

Whilst autobiographical discussions of the penis as a male signifier and the breasts as a female signifier necessarily focused upon transsexual representations of their own bodies, Hewitt and Townsend are deputising other people's bodies as sex signs. These other bodies, being non-transsexual, are represented as already being male or female, thus resulting in the representation of their transsexual partner as correspondingly female or male. This isomorphism depends upon their signified difference to the opposite sex within the basic heterosexual framework, outlined by Alan Sinfield thus:

A man has:	desire-to-be M	desire-for F
A woman has:	desire-to-be F	desire-for M ⁴

At play in *A Self-Made Man* and *Hidden in Plain Sight* is what Judith Butler called the 'heterosexual logic that... identification and desire be mutually exclusive... if one identifies as a given gender, one must desire a different gender.'⁵ Hewitt identified as male, and therefore desired females. Townsend identified as a female and therefore desired males. Portrayed as straight, their sexual relationships indicated that they were necessarily of the opposite sex to their partners. The extracts also tell of the roles both took on in such encounters, indicating the entanglement of male and female with masculinity and femininity; of sexuality with gender, and of them all with sex. Both Hewitt's sexual dominance (his masculinity, his gender) *and* his coupling with a woman (his heterosexuality) signify him as male. Likewise, it is Townsend's sexual passivity, her objectification by the male gaze (her femininity, her gender) *and* her coupling with men (her heterosexuality) which signify her as female. His activity and her passivity do not simply endorse their heterosexual orientations, they are thoroughly enmeshed in them. Hewitt's masculinity seems built upon his asserted heterosexuality, and Townsend's heterosexuality seems predicated upon her taking on the feminine role. As Sinfield writes, 'the structure appears complementary at every point – as it should do, for it is designed to ratify heteronormativity.'⁶

⁴ Alan Sinfield, *On Sexuality and Power* (New York, NY., 2004), p.17.

⁵ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (New York, NY., 1993), p.239; Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (2nd edn., with intro by Butler, New York, NY., 1999, orig. 1989), pp.9-11.

⁶ Sinfield, *On Sexuality and Power*, p.17.

This chapter is an exploration of how Bernice Hausman's statement that 'gender is a concept meaningful only within heterosexuality and in advocacy of heterosexuality' might be used to see how transsexual autobiographies made use of heteronormativity in signifying their authors as men or women.⁷ What, though, counted as 'normal' heterosexuality? Lynne Segal warns us against 'the affirmation of any one sexual position' and suggests that we must 'acknowledge that there are *many "heterosexualities"*.'⁸ Being a male attracted to women does not, she says, necessarily imply that you are masculine and vice versa. The whole point of heteronormativity is to avoid this admission and impose instead a monolithic notion of 'straightness' predicated upon undisturbed 'binaries linking sex and gender'.⁹ Segal demands, only half-jokingly, "*How Dare You Assume What It Means To Be Straight*", but it is an assumed meaning which serves significant purposes in many transsexual autobiographies.¹⁰ As Hewitt and Townsend implied, sex distinction was for them signified by their heterosexuality and their gendered behaviour. It was his sexual desire for a woman, and hers for a man, which signified them respectively as a man and a woman. It was his masculine action and her feminine passivity which helped signify them as a man and a woman. Thus a circuit appears: sexuality and gender depend upon sex, which depends upon sexuality and gender, which depend upon sex. The real significant power of the circuit lies in its naturalisation, its 'normativity', as when Hewitt demurs that, although he may come across as a typically sex-obsessed lad, he has 'little control over the magnetic forces of nature.'¹¹ If sexuality can be made to seem natural, to appear 'pre-discursive', as Butler has it, then the gender roles and sex differences it supports in the circuit will also appear natural/normal.¹² If Hewitt's heterosexual desires and his masculine sexual dominance can be represented in his autobiography as occurring naturally, then they can be powerful signs of his male self.

⁷ Bernice L. Hausman, *Changing Sex: Transsexualism, Technology and the Idea of Gender* (Durham, NC., 1995), p.194.

⁸ Lynne Segal, *Straight Sex: The Politics of Pleasure* (London, 1994), p.260.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.261.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Hewitt, *A Self-Made Man*, p.70.

¹² Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p.11.

Townsend called sexual intercourse a 'natural high' – not simply because it gave her a moment of physical pleasure, but because it allowed her to experience herself 'as a female.'¹³

Because sexuality and gender are not dependent upon the surgical and chemical technologies productive of the 'sex change' itself, they frequently operate within the autobiographies as contiguous and unaltered sex signs, pointing the reader towards a belief in the author as having always really been a man or a woman. Whilst the penis or the breasts are represented in the autobiographies as initially misleading, heterosexuality and the gendered roles of masculine and feminine usually point in the right direction from the outset. Because there is no need for them to be changed, because they require no 'artificial' medical intervention, sexuality and gender are represented as the writer's 'normative' state, and thus natural signs of the author's sex. This contiguous presentation of sexuality and gender may be read as a facet of the generic nature of the narratives. Hausman's claim is that transsexual autobiographies are rendered contradictory by 'the discontinuity between the story of surgical sex change and the story of already being the other sex.' This contradiction, between change and continuity, she suggests, 'undermines the main assertions concerning the self as other sex that transsexual autobiographers make and seek to maintain in these texts.'¹⁴ To apply her contention to the deployment of sexuality and gender within the accounts, would elicit the disjuncture I noted above between those sex signs which require technological intervention (body parts) and those which do not (identity, gender role, sexual orientation). For Hausman, as I explained in the Introduction, this is problematic because it demonstrates that whilst the transsexual professes to always have really been a woman (or man) their entire story hinges upon them changing into a woman (or a man).

Nevertheless, this disjuncture is not necessarily as crippling to the narrative authority of transsexual autobiography as Hausman would perhaps have it. Not only are the accounts confessedly the story of making both the contiguous and the changing sex signs all point in the same (right) direction, but the disjuncture is also structurally inherent in autobiography as a genre. Jay Prosser's argument that autobiography's structure does not move in a simple,

¹³ Townsend, *Hidden in Plain Sight*, p.93.

¹⁴ Hausman, *Changing Sex*, p.173.

linear fashion, but rather is founded upon a 'temporal double movement' shows us that autobiography is 'structured as a progression – developmental, moving toward a *telos* – the life in writing is always a retrospective reconstruction.'¹⁵ Thus the surgically-changed sex signs function as the progressive elements, moving towards the *telos*, and the contiguous ideas of sexuality and gender serve as organising principles around which the life in writing is retrospectively reconstructed. Prosser insists that 'the temporal "discontinuity" that Hausman finds in transsexual autobiography... between becoming and being... cannot be understood apart from the temporal dynamics intrinsic to the autobiographical form.'¹⁶ What I want to do in this chapter is extrapolate the ways in which sexuality and gender operate as the 'being' element within transsexual autobiography, the ways in which they are ranged as proof of the heteronormative 'always was' element of the author's sex. The initial manifestation of this, as I know want to show, is in the disavowal of pre-operative homosexuality.

Massive Relief

'I think,' mused April Ashley in *Odyssey* (1983), 'that it was Dame Edna Everage who said, "Lesbianism leaves a nasty taste in my mouth." I've nothing against it, myself... many lesbians have fallen for me. But I suppose the reason that I've never been able to fall back is that I'm always so smitten with men.'¹⁷ Ashley's comments reflect perfectly the representation of homosexuality in transsexual autobiography. None of the transsexuals were homophobic, but none of them wanted to be thought of as homosexual, either. In many cases, the autobiography becomes an extended exercise in distancing the historical subject from any association with gayness or lesbianism.¹⁸ 'At about the age of eleven or twelve,' wrote

¹⁵ Jay Prosser, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality* (New York, NY., 1998), p.117.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* p.118.

¹⁷ April Ashley with Duncan Fallowell, *April Ashley's Odyssey* (London, 1982), p.247.

¹⁸ The distancing has sometimes come from the other side, also. The organisers of London's 'Gay Pride' parade, for instance, removed the word 'transgender' from the march title in 1999, after several years of heated debate as to whether transsexuals and homosexuals had the same political aims. Similarly, the separatist lesbians who organise the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival operate a 'Womyn-Born-Womyn' only entrance policy, specifically to bar transsexuals. (I discuss the sometimes explosive confrontations between such 'radical' feminism and transsexuality in the next chapter.) For the most part, though, transsexuals, gay men, and lesbians have usually set aside their differences and grouped together to find common cause in their struggles for civil rights. The inclusive GLBT (Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgendered) acronym has been adopted by many such organisations. For example, at the time of writing every Students' Union at every British university boasted a GLBT society

Raymond Thompson in *What Took You So Long?* (1995), 'I began to realise that I had to be a lot more cautious about keeping bits of myself well hidden from others. Like my attraction to, what was for me, the opposite sex.'¹⁹ Here, in this short sentence, it is possible to read every aspect of the signifying disjunctures of continuity/change and soma/psyche that characterise transsexual autobiographical accounts of sexuality. The first conflict is between the 'bits' of himself that Thompson felt he had to keep hidden during his childhood in South East Wales. In the extract he refers to his desire for girls – a sex everyone else assumed him to be, because of the pre-operative signs they read on his body. This sexual orientation, he knew, he must camouflage, for fear of the opprobrium it generally brought. Yet we know also that Thompson spent much of his adolescence hiding the physical signs of his femininity: he loathed wearing skirts, would not shave his legs, could not discuss menstruation with his mother, padded the front of his jeans, and sought to be treated as a boy by his mates.²⁰ He both sought to hide his female body, whilst simultaneously knowing it socially safer to hide his desire for other female bodies. Both subterfuges stemmed from his identification as a man and his wish to be so identified by others. Whilst his bodily sex signs still pointed the 'reader' towards a conclusion of 'female' he could not safely assert his attraction towards women, for it would produce a further conclusion of 'lesbian.' His distaste for this stemmed not from any homophobia or sexual repression, but from what an allegation of lesbianism necessarily implied: that he was a woman. Thus when his mother discovered a teen-aged love-letter he had penned to another girl, this whole lexicon of conflicting sex signs came into play. His mother became upset, and angrily burnt the missive. 'I suppose,' Thompson commented, 'her fear was that I was becoming a lesbian. Little did she know what was really ailing me. I was a boy.'²¹ Thompson's agony founded itself in precisely these conflicts: his desire-to-be male and his desire-for females could not work out in Sinfield's heteronormative framework because his body still signified him as female.

(sometimes expanding into GLBTQ, or GLBTQI, for 'Queer' or 'Questioning' and 'Intersexed'). The California State Senate has had a GLBT caucus since the early 1990s, whilst the American National Library of Medicine, at the National Institutes of Health, sponsors a 'GLBT Awareness Month' lecture.

¹⁹ Raymond Thompson with Kitty Sewell, *What Took You So Long? A Girl's Journey to Manhood* (London, 1995), p.29.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp.42, 43, 54, 55

²¹ *Ibid.*, p.29

Caroline Cossey, growing up a decade earlier in East Anglia, suffered from similar conflicts of signification. As a young boy, she spent much of her recreation time secretly playing with dolls and dancing to pop music. 'I loved Helen Shapiro,' she wrote in *My Story* (1991), 'and we had all her records. Dusty Springfield and Cilla Black were also favourites... The fear that I was gay must have been in my Dad's mind. He was a conventional man and in the 1960s, homosexuality was a taboo subject.'²² Her body led her Dad to read her as a boy, but her own feelings led her to think of herself as a girl. These feelings were not limited to idolising the female pop stars of the day: Cossey felt sexually attracted to what, as Raymond Thompson put it, 'was for me, the opposite sex.' She recalled, for example, her one and only sexual encounter with a 'natural' girl. 'She had a well-developed chest. I was envious. It was a brief encounter and I mimed pleasure, sustaining an erection by role-reversal – I imagined I was being made love to by a man.'²³ Like Thompson, she knew that this conflict was a matter of concern and, like him, she aimed to neutralise it, although where he hid this 'bit' of himself, she brought it to her older brother for discussion. He reassured her: just a phase, all boys go through it, you'll grow out of it soon enough, perfectly normal, don't worry. But worry she did. "No", I said, "It's more serious than that. I fantasize about being a woman, not a man. Are these homosexual feelings?"²⁴ Cossey's brother said not, and she was happy to accept his judgement, both then and when she came to write her autobiography. The suggestion that she was a gay man unnerved her not just because 'homosexuality was taboo' when she was young, but because it would have labelled her precisely as a gay *man*. It was that judgement, and not homosexuality in and of itself, which she sought to escape. Thus when she recalled actually having 'gay sex' (which she makes synonymous with anal penetration) she effectively wrote herself out of any same-sex desire, describing her pre-operative sexual encounters with gay men as 'unerotic and unpleasantly painful.' She was, she wrote, 'only truly excited by heterosexual men.'²⁵ And so, whilst her body pointed her audience, be it her father, brother, or readers of her autobiography, to read her as a man, she has already begun to use her

²² Caroline Cossey, *My Story* (London, 1991), p.8

²³ *Ibid.*, p.12.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p.23.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p.29. Sinfield suggests that such a statement may not necessarily be a disavowal of homosexuality. 'In the mid-twentieth century, men such as Quentin Crisp believed that effeminate homosexuals sought "to win the love of a 'real' man." So the ultimate partner was a straight-identified man who desired the feminine.' Sinfield, *On Sexuality and Power*, p.19; Quentin Crisp, *The Naked Civil Servant* (New York, NY., 1977, orig.1966), p.56.

'desire-for' to point them in the other direction. The disjunctures could be considered as detrimental to the coherence of the narratives, but they can also be seen as instrumental to them. The conflicts between body and soul are what drive the stories towards resolution. The denial of homosexuality is a formative part of that drive.

Deirdre McCloskey was forced into this denial in the most dangerous scenario possible; sectioned in a Chicago mental hospital under the civil legal orders of her 'worried' sister. The stated reason for her incarceration was mental instability as evinced by her 'insane' identification as a woman. In the course of the imprisonment, whilst her friends and colleagues worked to have her released, she was interviewed by a psychiatrist. Her account of the conversation bears lengthy quotation for what it reveals about the significance of heteronormativity:

The psychiatrist came sweeping into the little room with the air of a man cutting through all the nonsense to get to the core.

"Are you a homosexual?" he demanded, without sitting down.

"Uh, no." *Good Lord*, Dee thought astonished, *doesn't he know the difference between homosexuality and transsexuality, who you love and who you are? Yiddish syntax: This is a psychiatrist?*

"Have you ever had a homosexual experience?"

"No." *Sweet Jesus, what's he leading up to?*

"Do you wish to become one?" *Holy Mary, he's got a category "Them" in his mind, containing all sorts of threats to maleness. The chair of the Department of Psychiatry doesn't know anything at all even about so common a thing as homosexuality. I might as well be "diagnosed" by the average homophobe drinking boilermakers down at the American Legion.*

"No, I've never wished to become a homosexual," replied Dee as nonchalantly as he could manage.

The doctor stood, astonished. "Well, then, *Why are you doing this?*"
***Good God In heaven... he appears to think that homosexuality
and gender crossing are the same thing – that homosexuals want
to be women and that gender crossers are in it for the sex.***²⁶

McCloskey figured this attempt to equate homosexuality with transsexuality to be part of a wider scheme of 'policing gender.'²⁷ Such police action was a manifestation of the heteronormative framework within which transsexuals had to operate in order to successfully signify themselves as men and women. McCloskey is unusual amongst transsexual autobiographers in that she had previously lived very happily as a heterosexual man, Donald. Admittedly, she wrote, Donald did crossdress, but this was mid-century America and 'in homophobic times he was comforted that he was in other respects "normal" in his sexual drives. It was important to know this, even in the relatively tolerant household he was born into.'²⁸ It was important then, in 1950s Boston, because he wished to be thought of as straight, to think of himself as straight, had not yet come to conceive of himself as transsexual, as a woman. It was important later, in 1990s Chicago, because he wished to be thought of as transsexual, to think of himself as a woman. At either time, 'queer' was not the right word – initially because it was 'not normal', and ultimately because it would have meant she was really a man. And so, when McCloskey settled down to contemplate her successful journey from Donald to Deirdre, she put the idea that 'gender crossing has to do with homosexuality' at the very top of the list of 'misunderstandings she had encountered.'²⁹

Again and again transsexuals encountered medical professionals and others who, as Cossey put it in her introduction to *My Story*, 'think transsexuals are frustrated homosexuals.'³⁰ Jan Morris, for example, trod what she called in *Conundrum* (1974), the 'long, well-beaten, expensive and fruitless path of the Harley Street psychiatrists and sexologists' in the 1950s and 60s, only to be asked 'was I sure I was not just a suppressed

²⁶ Deirdre McCloskey, *Crossing: a Memoir* (Chicago, 1999), p.111. The ***bold*** typeface is McCloskey's.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p.10 .

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p.250.

³⁰ Cossey, *My Story*, p.xi.

homosexual like so many others?'³¹ Morris was sure, for 'none of it fitted. I did not consider myself a homosexual.'³² To consider herself thus, she would have to have 'desired-to-be' male as well as had 'desire-for' males, which was precisely the incongruence she was trying to escape. The same was true, thirty years later in the rarefied atmosphere of New England academia for Jennifer Finney Boylan, who writes:

My conviction certainly had nothing to do with whether I was attracted to girls or boys. This last point was the one that, years later, would most frequently elude people, including the over-educated smarty-pants who constituted much of my inner circle. But being gay... is about sexual orientation. Being transgendered is about identity.³³

Even so, that 'identity' was formed out of the heteronormative insistence upon isomorphism between 'desire-to-be', 'desire-for' and what we might call 'signification-as'. Much of the confusion over pre-operative transsexual identities and orientations stemmed, I think, from conflicting sex signs, with 'desire-to-be' and 'desire-for' pointing the audience in one sexed direction and body parts signifying the other. Paul Hewitt encountered such complications often, such as when he visited with the parents of his new girlfriend. 'Drawing upon their vast experience of gender dysphoria' he wrote of the disastrous encounter, 'they have pronounced me as nothing more than a frustrated lesbian... I was really upset. I don't know why.'³⁴ And yet he did. Still 'breasted', still lacking the 'scientific fact', he appeared to them as a woman. Yet his girlfriend's parents did not pronounce him as a woman outright, they chose instead to comment on his sexual orientation, letting his perceived lesbianism undermine his 'desire-to-be' male. Earlier on in his life, Hewitt himself had been plagued by similar thoughts. He had fallen in love with another woman, and 'fought desperately to come to terms with the only conclusion my logic could draw. I must be a lesbian.'³⁵ Why? Because his bodily sex signs

³¹ Jan Morris, *Conundrum* (reprint with intro. by Jan Morris, London, 2002, orig. edn., London, 1974), p.40.

³² *Ibid.*, p.41.

³³ Jennifer Finney Boylan, *She's Not There: A Life in Two Genders* (New York, NY., 2003), p.21.

³⁴ Hewitt, *A Self-Made Man*, p.59.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p.45.

pointed towards his being a woman and his orientation drew him towards others with similar bodies. But then the inference of lesbian, that he was a woman, struck him as incorrect. This was a major factor in the realisation of his transsexuality. 'It wasn't for another six months that I realised the full truth – that my relationship with Nicky had not been lesbian; it had been heterosexual. I had the mind of a man; I related to women as a male. The realisation was a massive relief. Suddenly I was free to be me.'³⁶ His knowledge of himself as a man is inextricably linked to his heterosexuality, to the sexual way in which he relates to women. The pervasive entanglements of sexuality and identity are thrown into their starkest relief in Hewitt's autobiography when he recounts catching sight of an ex-boyfriend of his formerly female-bodied self. 'I pretended I hadn't seen him. He's probably not aware that his relationship with me was homosexual and I didn't want to horrify him further.'³⁷

Aleshia Brevard suffered from much the same confusions as Hewitt did – though this time in amongst the grime and glamour of early 1960s San Francisco, rather than mid 1980s Reading. Brevard worked as a hugely successful drag artiste in the famous Finnochio's Revue Bar, a job which was generally associated with gay men. Certainly most of her colleagues were homosexual and she enjoyed their company, and yet:

In spite of the acclaim, coming to terms with my new identity was troublesome. I did not "feel" I was queer. I certainly differed from the heterosexual men I knew, but I also differed from the young gay drag queens with whom I worked.³⁸

Brevard explicitly connected her sexuality to her identity as a woman: not a straight man, but not a gay man either. So why was she dressing up in sequined tights, feather boas and silk dresses? 'I wasn't lampooning women,' she realised, 'I was trying to find myself... Every night after I left the stage, I was forced to leave my real self behind.'³⁹ Brevard found that, before

³⁶ Ibid., p.47.

³⁷ Ibid., p.126.

³⁸ Aleshia Brevard, *The Woman I Was Not Born To Be: a Transsexual Journey* (Philadelphia, PA., 2001), p.44.

³⁹ Ibid.

her operations, it was only within a visibly heterosexual framework that she could easily project that identity. When she stepped out with her boyfriend, Hank, 'a handsome, brown-eyed, strapping six-three figure of a man' she discovered that few people thought of her as a gay man – even though some of her bodily sex signs might have pointed them in that direction. 'Because Hank was seen as a man, I was allowed to be a woman.'⁴⁰ At a time in her life when many of her bodily sex-signs pointed in the direction of 'man', her avowedly heterosexual relationship with a straight man allowed Brevard to point her audience towards a different conclusion; the one she had desired-to-be all along.

Pursuing much the same career at much the same time as Brevard, but in the clubs of Paris and London, April Ashley was also at pains to differentiate herself from her homosexual associates. Dwelling on her days playing Europe's best known drag shows, she wrote that 'I regard myself as neither transvestite nor homosexual, although aspects of my life have perforce overlapped with these.'⁴¹ Both these identities were unacceptable to Ashley for the simple reason that they contained within them the idea of 'man' – be it a man who wore women's clothes (a transvestite) or a man who was attracted to other men (a homosexual). She once told a doctor who, like McCloskey's psychiatrist and Morris's sexologists, assumed her to be a frustrated homosexual, that though she was approached nearly every day by gay men, 'I don't like it, and I don't do it.'⁴² Instead, she agreed with the sentiments of her friend, Ina, 'a true transsexual and very happy (who) had been in the Merchant Navy. He didn't want to be discharged for being a homosexual because he didn't consider himself one.'⁴³ Being kicked out of the armed forces for being gay was injurious to Ina not simply for the loss of her job, but for the signification of her as a man. Another transsexual in the Navy (the Wrens, this time), Mark Rees, also struggled to identify himself correctly. 'Was this being in love?' he wondered of his attraction to another Wren in the early 1960s. He writes:

It was a joyful yet painful realisation. We could be close mentally but not physically. My extreme horror of a physical relationship was not

⁴⁰ Ibid., p.93.

⁴¹ Ashley, *Odyssey*, p.76.

⁴² Ibid., p.31.

⁴³ Ibid., p.46.

because of the fear of service disapproval – others had risked it – but because of my abhorrence of my own body, being seen as a woman and unable to have a normal heterosexual relationship with a female.⁴⁴

Like Ina, Rees worried not so much about the possibility of professional dismissal, but about incorrect sexual signification. The word he feared was not 'discharged' but 'dyke.' His apparent inability to be a normal heterosexual led him, 'because of the lack of information to regard myself as some kind of "deviant" lesbian. I couldn't find another label.'⁴⁵ Thus a few years later he went with some friends to a lesbian club. 'That finally convinced me, that whatever others may have thought, I was certainly no lesbian.' Not because he did not find women sexually attractive, as lesbians did, but because they were also women and he considered himself the diametric opposite. He would have to alter his physical 'signification-as' to complement his 'desire-for' within heteronormativity. Recalling this revelation, Rees affirmed it with reference to pre-operative counselling he had received from Doreen Cordell, a social worker for the Albany Trust (who work with transsexual patients): 'she declared that I had always been "psychologically heterosexual". She was right.'⁴⁶ Rather like McCloskey, Rees too surveyed the field of popular cultural assumptions about transsexuality and wrote that 'we are lumped together with homosexuals. It should be clear by now that this is not the case.'⁴⁷ The case, most transsexual autobiographers hoped, was that they should be considered heterosexual, that is 'lumped together' in a relational framework wherein the ideas of 'man and 'woman' are clearly delimited, and where there are specific roles for distinctly male and female bodies. In transsexual autobiographies it is what Sinfield calls 'desire-to-be' (male or female) and 'desire-for' (female or male) which operate as Prosser's 'being' element, and it is what we might call 'signification-as' (a sexed body) which function as the 'becoming' element. I want now to explore the ways in which the autobiographers, having written themselves *out* of a homosexual identification, wrote themselves back *in* to a straight one.

⁴⁴ Mark Rees, *Dear Sir or Madam? The Autobiography of a Female-to-Male Transsexual* (London, 1996), p.58.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p.59.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p.177.

A Chance To Function

In an attempt to reconcile with his estranged parents, Raymond Thompson struggled to explain the situation to his mother, who 'still fundamentally believed that I was gay... I tried to tell her that I was not a lesbian, that this condition had nothing to do with sexual orientation, but with my very identity as a person.'⁴⁸ Thompson's pleas to his mother were slightly misleading, for whilst sexuality may not have been the 'cause' of his transsexuality, it was certainly one of the things he repeatedly made use of in order to signify his identity as a man. Discussing one of his girlfriends, he writes:

I had strong sexual feelings and I was able to get pleasure from lying on top of her and making love to her as the man I knew myself to be. Irene wasn't a lesbian, she had never had a relationship with a woman. The word lesbian never entered our conversation and as far as I was concerned, we were man and woman.⁴⁹

Here, Thompson writes himself and his girlfriend out of 'lesbians' and into 'heterosexual couple', and thus into 'man and woman.' His heterosexuality was not the cause of his need to change sex, but as a major signifier of his identity as a man, it was certainly one of the symptoms of it. In the final passages of Thompson's autobiography, he is reunited with his one true love, Loretta, who takes him into her arms and asks the question that gives the book its title, 'What took you so long?'⁵⁰ With this denouement, the entire autobiography is transformed into a classic heterosexual quest narrative which serves to signify him as a man: guy meets girl, guy loses girl, guy gets girl back, everyone lives happily ever after. Throughout *What Took You So Long?* Thompson's heterosexuality serves as sign pointing the reader towards a conception of him as a man, despite what his pre-operative bodily sex signs might have indicated. In the 'temporal double movement' of autobiography, his heterosexuality is the seemingly pre-discursive fact around which his surgical and hormonal constructions are retrospectively organised.

⁴⁸ Thompson, *What Took You So Long?* p.151

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p.89.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p.312.

The representation of heterosexuality in Paul Hewitt's *A Self-Made Man* is simultaneously more explicit than it is in *What Took You So Long?* whilst also being more ambiguous. In deliberately entangling heterosexuality and his male body with his identity as a man, he openly asserts both that sexuality was not a cause of his transsexuality and that it was central to his sex change. In a passage early on in the book, he discusses the possible explanations for his condition. 'Who I am attracted to is not really the issue. I am changing gender for reasons that make my sex life pale into insignificance.'⁵¹ These reasons, he has already made clear, are focused upon the 'fight for (my) identity' as a man.⁵² He goes on, 'This is not about who I can and cannot sleep with. This is about me. Marriage and a heterosexual partnership still fit into the game plan, but they are not my reasons for having a sex-change.'⁵³ Heterosexuality, in Hewitt's life-story, serves as just one more signifier of himself as a man. Yet in insisting upon the pre-existing fact of his heterosexuality (around which he, like Thompson, will arrange his physical changes), Hewitt is unable to sustain a narrative in which that very sexuality does not propel his crossing. 'Transsexuality is not homosexuality,' he categorically states, 'I did not do this because I was a lesbian, but because I was a heterosexual male, albeit in the wrong body.'⁵⁴ The key point here is that for Hewitt 'heterosexual male' is clearly significant of his identity as a man. Upon realising that he was 'heterosexual. I had the mind of a man. I related to women as a male,' he wrote, 'Suddenly, I was free to be me.'⁵⁵ Correctly reading the sign of his 'desire-for' females (that he is straight not lesbian) allowed him to believe in himself as a man.

In *My Story*, Caroline Cossey makes similar significant connections between her sexuality and her identity as a woman. Yet unlike Hewitt and Thompson, she is far more explicit about the place of her female body, and actual heterosexual intercourse, in this equation. Discussing the impact that her vaginoplasty had upon her, she wrote that whilst she was relieved that the operation had been a success;

⁵¹ Hewitt, *A Self-Made Man*, p.22. On the use of 'gender' to mean 'biological sex' see Toril Moi, *What is a Woman? And Other Essays* (Oxford, 1999), p.86.

⁵² Hewitt, *A Self-Made Man*, p.21.

⁵³ Ibid., p.22. Note that Hewitt has slipped back into changing 'sex' rather than gender.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p.23.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p.47.

I didn't feel that much more 'female' because I'd had a vagina created for me. It wasn't purely the ability to have heterosexual intercourse which made me feel like a woman. I had always felt myself to be a woman, and still did. The operation gave me the chance to function in a sexual relationship. It gave me the choice. And it gave me the chance to live a normal life with a man.⁵⁶

The progressions in this passage, from the link between having a vagina and being female, to the link between having straight sex and being a woman, reintroduce the body itself into transsexual autobiographical explorations of heterosexuality. Again, however, for Cossey her heterosexuality (her attraction to men) serves as a pre-existing fact in her narrative. It is, as it was for Hewitt and Thompson, the permanent signifier of her identity. Thus even when she is equipped with a fully-functioning vagina, it is presented merely as the physical manifestation of a natural truth – that she 'had always felt myself to be a woman.' One important thing to note about Cossey's representation of heterosexuality is how she explicitly moves it away from the purely sexual 'intercourse,' and towards the more emotional, relational 'normal life with a man.' Much like Thompson's transformation of *What Took You So Long?* into a romantic quest narrative, the narrative of *My Story* is often propelled forward by Cossey's search for 'Mr Right.' This is by no means contradictory of the stated transsexual autobiographical trajectory of male body to female body (or vice versa) precisely because it is in achieving heterosexual happiness with a man that Cossey feels she is best able to signify her own transition to womanhood. Her 'desire-to-be' and her 'desire-for' legitimate one another, but only so long as they are coupled with a complementary bodily 'signification-as' female.

The utility of a heterosexual relationship in the signification of his identity as a man is so attractive to Paul Hewitt that he begins to re-write his own sexual history from the point of view of his straight male self. For instance, an ex-girlfriend (with whom he had been before

⁵⁶ Cossey, *My Story*, p.103.

coming out as transsexual) became angry with him for 'telling people we used to live together' because she was 'terrified people at work will hear that I am gay. I can't afford to have you going around mouthing off.'⁵⁷ Mulling on this, Hewitt writes, 'I had always considered our time together to be heterosexual. I am proud of our time together... I am a man who lived with a woman – to me it was that simple.' By his own reckoning, this is 'incurably honest' of him (although the ex-girlfriend, a closeted lesbian, would perhaps disagree), because it is all 'part of me making a stand for my male identity.'⁵⁸ In order for his signification as a man to succeed, Hewitt must present his 'desire-for' females, his heterosexuality, as 'already there,' as pre-discursive, otherwise his claim to 'already be' a man would make no sense, considering that he has a female body. Hence why, when his 'roving eyes' are caught ogling a female social worker, rather than being repentant, he proudly quotes her response, "That's alright... It's obviously something you do quite naturally."⁵⁹ The natural fact of his heterosexuality legitimates his claim to manhood and so all his relationships must be presented as appearing to him heterosexual.

April Ashley spends a good deal of her *Odyssey* detailing her many and varied heterosexual relationships, amongst which were one-night stands in the 1960s with Peter O'Toole, and with Omar Sharif. The relationship with Sharif is of particular use in the signification of Ashley's identity as a woman for, or so she recalls, 'To my very great surprise I later discovered that he knew nothing of my sex-change.' As a member of the international jet-set, Omar Sharif was totemic of a very glamorous form of heterosexuality. In deputising her time with him, Ashley is invoking precisely that sexuality, saying in effect that if Sharif, the great romantic lover, thought she was a woman then surely everyone else ought to. As she fondly remembers, 'He lived up to all my erotic expectations.'⁶⁰ Ashley also had plenty of famous men from the younger generation whose 'desire-for' her she could cite. Elvis Presley tried to buy her a drink whilst serving out his GI tour in Europe, and it is difficult to think of anyone in the late 1950s whose romantic attention could more certainly have marked

⁵⁷ Hewitt, *A Self-Made Man*, p.137.

⁵⁸ Ibid. Once again, Hewitt is mixing terms here; by 'male identity' he means 'man' not the identification of his body as being of the male sex.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p.23.

⁶⁰ Ashley, *Odyssey*, p.145.

someone out as a woman. And even when Ashley's relationship with men was mostly platonic, as it was with John Lennon, she still seems to be calling on the heterosexual hinterland of the screaming girls at Kennedy airport when she remembers how he 'nicknamed me Duchess.'⁶¹ Ashley's celebrity lifestyle, with its constantly changing rota of who was in and who was out, ensures a certain historicism to her heterosexuality, and thus to her womanhood. She was, after all, considered one of the most beautiful women in Europe, and one of the signifiers of that was being romantically associated with the most handsome men of the day. Of course, as the history of the magazine *People* has shown, the holders of those 'titles' change rapidly over time.⁶² Thus in the 1980s, when Caroline Cossey stood at the pinnacle of the domestic British glamour model pile, the celebrity relationship she remembers best was with television presenter Des Lynam, now a genteel presenter of daytime quiz shows, but in the 1980s, the very model of suave, sophisticated manhood. She had worried that he would, once he knew her past, feel differently for her. 'I want to be with a man who desires me as a woman,' she said to him. If Omar Sharif did April Ashley the honour of not noticing her sex change, Des Lynam went one better for Caroline Cossey: 'A few months later, he asked me to marry him.'⁶³ The basic heterosexual coupling – a man and a woman – remained exactly the same throughout the 'transsexual era', but the individuals who popular culture believed to best embody that coupling changed over time. In the 1960s, when her relationship with the aristocrat, Arthur Corbett, was made public, Ashley and he made a concerted effort to co-opt the glamorous iconography of famous couples such as Liz Taylor and Richard Burton in their representations to the press.⁶⁴ In the early 1980s, then, it is no coincidence that Cossey's 'dream wedding' to Elias Fattal, with its huge reception at the Savoy Hotel, and her designer gown with its lengthy train, was an expensive imitation of the Royal Wedding of Prince Charles and Diana Spencer.⁶⁵ In these cases both women were not only making use of the 'abstract' languages of heterosexual signification ('I'm with a straight man, I must be a woman') but were co-opting very specific, highly culturally legible, examples of such signs (Omar Sharif! Des Lynam!), as though to legitimate theory with experience.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p.177.

⁶² http://people.aol.com/people/galleries/0,19884,1113899_1127386,00.html, (first viewed 17 November 2005).

⁶³ Cossey, *My Story*, p.121.

⁶⁴ See Chapter Five, "Wife a Man", below.

⁶⁵ Cossey, *My Story*, pp.190-200.

Heterosexual experience was something that both Jan Morris and Deirdre McCloskey had a great deal of. Unlike most other transsexual autobiographers (Hewitt and Thompson in particular) both women happily recounted their as-men relationships with women as just that: heterosexual relationships – marriages, in fact. Written in Ray Thompson's or Paul Hewitt's schema, either woman's marriage would have become the equivalent of a 'same-sex partnership' but the trajectory of Morris's and McCloskey's narratives prevent such a re-imagining of the past. Peculiar to both *Conundrum* and *Crossing* is the fact that both women change sex much later on in their lives than other transsexual autobiographers: Morris was in her mid-forties and McCloskey in her early-fifties. Morris, like almost all the other autobiographers had known of her condition from a very early age ('I was three or perhaps four years old when I realised I had been born into the wrong body'⁶⁶) but nevertheless enjoyed a 'marriage that had no right to work, yet it worked like a dream... this passionate amity... a sense of arcane and ecstatic understanding.'⁶⁷ Morris's wife, Elizabeth, always knew of her husband's transsexuality but, nevertheless, 'grand our love has been.'⁶⁸ They never separated (although they became legally divorced after Morris's sex change, even though British law would still have recognised her as a man) and live together to this day in their house, *Trefan Morys*, in the Welsh countryside.⁶⁹ Deirdre McCloskey, on the other hand, did not consciously realise she was a woman until well into middle age. She had cross-dressed as both man and boy, but had taken considerable comfort in the fact that 'As a man, I love women... I'm just a heterosexual cross-dresser.'⁷⁰ As Donald, she enjoyed a successful marriage for several years and, like Morris, had children. Unlike Morris, however, McCloskey's wife never knew of her husband's transsexuality and, when he told her, felt betrayed, 'angry and ashamed... She feels that her marriage was meaningless. "Was I

⁶⁶ Morris, *Conundrum*, p.1. This is, in fact, the opening line of the book. In deploying it thus, Morris ensures that her readers begin her narrative with the ending already in mind – a strategy which makes her change from a male body to a female one seem like a natural progression, the passing of time.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.51, 52.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p.52.

⁶⁹ Morris suggests that she and Elizabeth now have a relationship that is closer to that of 'sisters' than a married couple. Jan Morris, *Pleasures of a Tangled Life* (New York, NY., 1989), pp.6-14.

⁷⁰ McCloskey, *Crossing*, pp.9, 16. According to p.9, it was 'only at another, buried level' that 'he wish(ed) to become a young woman.'

married for all those years," she asks, "to a woman? What does that make me?" A woman raised in a small town in the 1950s was not relaxed about homosexuality.⁷¹ McCloskey is not re-writing the relationship as Hewitt might have done, but is content instead to allow her ex-wife's fear of lesbianism to slightly signify her (McCloskey's) own identity as a woman.

What is interesting about Morris and McCloskey is that it seems only to be after their physical transitions into female bodies that they begin to use heterosexuality as a signifier of their respective womanhoods, and the circumspect ways in which they do so. McCloskey, for example, is startled by the sudden realisation of the meaning of a conversation she had with a chatty man on a plane. 'The talkative man was a fling... I like being a woman to a man.'⁷² There are no glamorous affairs (or even tawdry ones) with celebrities in *Crossing*, merely the occasional reference to being 'emotionally' interested in men.⁷³ For Morris, her sex-change allowed her to openly discuss her attraction to men – but only in the most restrained of terms. 'You are wondering,' she knowingly addresses her reader, 'how I now saw women and men. Clearly, I would say, and for the first time... I saw how deeply I had pined for the arms and the love of a man. I saw how proud and brave a wife I would have been.'⁷⁴ Neither Morris nor McCloskey is sexually explicit in using heterosexuality to signify their womanhood, either in their recollections of their sexual past (because they had no such as-women experiences to make use of) nor in descriptions of their 'contemporary' desires and lusts. Just as the passage of the decades changed the sex-symbols (*qua* sex signs) which April Ashley and Caroline Cossey made use of, so to did the passing of personal time, that is to say their actual age, change the ways in which Morris and McCloskey made use of heterosexuality. Both women were, after all, middle-aged when they changed sex and so had to represent themselves as middle-aged women, also. The wild sexual escapades that marked the lives of their younger compatriots would perhaps have jarred with their stated identities as women of a certain age. There may well be 'many heterosexualities' as Segal says, but not all of them are necessarily liberatory. Of course, the phrase 'women of a certain age' is a sexist comment, but, as so often in transsexual autobiographies, casual sexism seems to be part of

⁷¹ Ibid., p.225.

⁷² Ibid., p.191.

⁷³ Ibid., p.260.

⁷⁴ Morris, *Conundrum*, pp.135-6.

the common languages of sexual difference being spoken. It may not just be age, either, which informs upon Morris and McCloskey's descriptions of their sexuality. Both women are extremely successful, professional persons, *respectable*, even. The announcement that she had slept (or wanted to sleep) with Omar Sharif (and an assessment of his erotic capabilities) would maybe have been as unseemly coming from McCloskey-as-Tenured-Professor as it would be from McCloskey-as-Middle-Aged-Woman.

The social location of heterosexuality in transsexual autobiographies clearly had an impact on the way it was used to represent the authors as women or men. As Judith Walkowitz, George Chauncey and, more recently, Matt Houlbrook, have shown, geography itself (social and physical), impinges upon the constructions and enunciations of sexual identities, particularly the way in which they play out in spaces (especially urban) shared with other self-formations such as ethnicity, class, age and religion.⁷⁵ Frank Mort suggests that this sort of analysis 'points to the extremely porous nature of modern sexual identities, which are fluid and contingent partly because of their spatial proximity to other cultures and ways of life.'⁷⁶ Transsexual autobiographers can never be 'just' heterosexual; their heterosexuality, as Houlbrook notes of queer sociability in pre-Wolfenden Report London, was 'never self-evident, stable, or singular'.⁷⁷ It may have been presented thus, but it was inevitably located in particular social spaces which changed over time. Moving happily amongst the world of the international glitterati, April Ashley deployed celebrity couplings, whilst in her romantic world of wistful travel journalism, Jan Morris dreamed of the arms of a man. Both of these 'imaginary spaces', whilst wildly different, marked their straight identities.⁷⁸ Ashley's heterosexuality was the heterosexuality of the European jet-set, it was one which existed alongside the worlds of tax-havens, dynastic marriages, high commerce and global celebrity. Morris's heterosexuality was the heterosexuality of the writer, the artist, the aesthete. She would no more have shown her breasts to a European prince than Ashley would have

⁷⁵ Judith Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late Victorian London* (London, 1992); George Chauncey, *Gay New York: The Making of the Gay Male World 1890-1940* (London, 1994); Matt Houlbrook, *Queer London: Perils and Pleasures in the Sexual Metropolis, 1918-1957* (Chicago, 2005).

⁷⁶ Frank Mort, *Dangerous Sexualities: Medico-Moral Politics in England Since 1830* (2nd ed., London, 2000, orig. edn. 1987), p.xxiv.

⁷⁷ Houlbrook, *Queer London*, p.7.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p.8.

discoursed on the Marian cult.⁷⁹ The social space in which Raymond Thompson first acted as a heterosexual man also coloured his sexuality. In between several sojourns first in Borstal and then in prisons, he easily and almost unnoticeably slipped into a semi-criminal underclass. At one very low stage in his life, he found himself operating as a sort of accidental pimp on a housing estate in Cardiff, dating a 'working woman' who 'would have given all her earnings to whoever she was with.' By his own account, he 'took advantage of this, and sometimes went over the top. I used to see her in the street at night and grab her. I'd shout, "Where is the fucking money?" and she would give it all to me.'⁸⁰ This is a heterosexuality very different to that which Morris represented. In this violent expression of a heterosexual 'relationship' we see a rather extreme version of the traditional way in which heterosexuality, as a coupling in both sense of the word, is related to the gender isomorphisms of active-man/passive-woman. Class, or perhaps economic circumstance, combine with his urban surroundings to enable a heterosexuality which is expressed as prostitution and exploitation. The feminist legal scholar, Catherine MacKinnon, writes that prostitution is a part of the pattern of 'the power of men over women in society' and a 'fact of male power.'⁸¹ In recording his role as a pimp, Thompson is by no means endorsing the object of MacKinnon's fierce critique, but he *is* pointing out that, as a male with power over a female prostitute, he is a man. He was active, she was passive. This was, as I now want to explore, a manifestation of the heterosexual relationship which formed a mutually-legitimizing circuit with a very particular, masculinist way of thinking about heterosexual intercourse itself. Taken together, the heterosexual relationships themselves and the sex that took place within them operated as powerfully convincing signs of man and woman.

I Can't Get No (Satisfaction)

Thoroughly warming to her identity as a polite, middle-aged lady (she even sarcastically refers to herself as 'Aunty' on occasions), Deirdre McCloskey writes about herself:

⁷⁹ Ashley, *Odyssey*, p.1; Morris, *Conundrum*, p.15.

⁸⁰ Thompson, *What Took You So Long?* p.140.

⁸¹ Catherine A. MacKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified: Discourses on Life and Law*, (Cambridge, MA., 1987), pp.5, 52.

She thinks less about sex. A female-to-male gender crosser in a documentary called *You Don't Know Dick* said, "As a woman I wanted a relationship first, cuddling, with the sex as a supplement. Now the testosterone says the contrary, 'I need this now, now, now. When that's taken care of, well, maybe then we'll have a relationship.'" Yes.⁸²

The pursed-lipped 'Yes,' I think, says it all: men's interest in sex is, to McCloskey the woman, slightly prurient when compared to her own, more delicate feelings. Again and again in both FTM and MTF transsexual autobiographies, women are presented as being less interested in sex than men. As I quoted Paul Hewitt at the head of this chapter, 'Most men keep their brains in their underpants.'⁸³ Even when transsexual women do portray themselves as interested in sex, they are careful to keep their desire confined within the carefully delimited parameters of passivity. This is never more clearly stated than in MTF discussions of intercourse itself. As I have pointed out elsewhere, 'in the heterosexist context of twentieth-century sexual relations,' the chief signifier of a woman in a straight relationship tended to be 'the capacity of her vagina for penetration.'⁸⁴ In these contexts, penetration is portrayed as passive. When April Ashley lost her virginity to her friend, Skippy, she recalled that 'he made love to me so tenderly. Afterwards he said, "Was it OK?" I was sobbing and laughing, I couldn't stop. "It's the happiest moment of my life."⁸⁵ Note that it is Skippy who made love to her, not the other way around. He was the active partner in the coupling. Ashley reinforces this impression, writing rather wistfully, 'Wherever you are, dear Skippy, many dear kisses for being so kind to me on that miraculous night, and for helping me on the road to womanhood.'⁸⁶ Ashley is quite clear about it – masculine sexual activity and her feminine passivity helped her to signify herself as a woman. And so on the occasion that she 'felt it

⁸² McCloskey, *Crossing*, p.260. Here, of course, McCloskey is using 'gender' in the way that Hewitt occasionally does: to mean 'biological sex'.

⁸³ Hewitt, *A Self-Made Man*, p.70.

⁸⁴ Dan O'Connor, 'Potential Space, Potential Sex: The Value of the Vagina in Transsexual Autobiography' in Christopher E. Forth & Ivan Crozier (eds), *Body Parts: Critical Explorations in Corporeality* (Lanham, MD., 2005), p.168.

⁸⁵ Ashley, *Odyssey*, p.93.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.* p.94.

fully for the first time' (had an orgasm), she knew precisely who was responsible for this – her new boyfriend Joey, whom 'Mother Nature had equipped magnificently for love.'⁸⁷

Thinking about her surgery, Caroline Cossey was also excited about her new ability to have an orgasm, but she soon realised that in a decidedly heterosexist world she and her new vagina were now subject to the same sort of male power that Raymond Thompson exercised over his prostitute girlfriend. As she rode the train home from her convalescence, she remembered that, 'curiously, my first feeling was one of fear. I was hit by the full realisation of my vulnerability. "What if I were to be raped?" I thought.'⁸⁸ Let us consider what rape might mean in the signification of womanhood. In *Against Our Will*, Susan Brownmiller described rape as a 'process of intimidation by which *all* men keep *all* women in a state of fear.'⁸⁹ Women, like Cossey, are gendered in this statement by the possibility of rape. Rape, as Cossey unconsciously shows us, is an extreme paradigm of how heterosexual sex and masculine/feminine gender binaries legitimate one another. There is a powerful and controversial feminist argument that because the very act of heterosexual intercourse is akin to rape, any woman with a vagina is a potential rape victim. As Catherine MacKinnon writes in *Feminism Unmodified* (1987 – more than a decade after Cossey's sex-change), for the rapist and for the victim, 'their ordinary experiences of heterosexual intercourse and the act of rape have something in common.'⁹⁰ To MacKinnon, the commonality is 'force.' She is not – as she was frequently accused when she first made this critique – suggesting that all straight sex is rape, nor all straight men rapists. She suggests instead that because, in western jurisprudence, it is invariably incumbent upon the victim to prove a particular level of force ('more than usual') against her in order to secure a hearing, there are very low report-to-conviction rates for rape. Her point being that, 'unless you make the point that there is much violence in intercourse as a regular matter, none of that is changed... we (will) continue to stigmatize the women who claim rape as having experienced a deviant violation and allow the rest of us to go through life feeling violated but thinking we've never been raped.'⁹¹ Let us

⁸⁷ Ibid. p.98.

⁸⁸ Cossey, *My Story*, p.102.

⁸⁹ Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape* (New York, NY., 1975), p.15.

⁹⁰ MacKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified*, p.88.

⁹¹ Ibid. pp.88-9.

return this to Caroline Cossey, then. It was *only when she had a vagina* that she feared rape. There is a clear connection in her mind between her 'ability to be penetrated', her potential as a rape victim, and her identity and a woman. It seems to me that when MacKinnon is talking about 'force' and 'violation' as a regular part of heterosexual intercourse, she is actually referring to the penetration of the vagina as a *prima facie* act of corporeal violence, of invasion. For many of MacKinnon's critics, her argument only makes sense if we accept this as an operative truth, which they have refused to do because, as Samantha Besson writes, it seems to be, 'la modélisation des identités féminine et masculine qui ramène tout à la pénétration et déshumanise par conséquent les femmes comme les hommes' ('a model in which both masculine and feminine identity is reduced to penetration, which consequently dehumanises women as much as men.').⁹² However, I don't think that MacKinnon's argument should be read as essentialist. She is not reducing masculinity and femininity to penetration, but illustrating how they are inevitably informed by it. Rape (her immediate legal concern, but not mine in this dissertation) is a particularly stark illustration of this, as Caroline Cossey realised on that train.

Considering all the above, it is useful, I would suggest, to see penetration in heterosexual intercourse as a symbolic truth, one which forms a fundamental part of the 'sex circuits' I proposed at the beginning of this chapter. Penetration (the active male body and the passive female) mirrors gender (masculinity = activity, femininity = passivity). In turn, gender mirrors the manifestation of heterosexuality in which men are aggressively interested in sex, whilst women are more concerned with love and emotion. The circuit is completed when that version of heterosexuality mirrors the active male body penetrating the passive female body. There are, as I have said, 'many heterosexualities' in transsexual autobiography, but they all have this in common. Let me return, then, to the two stories this chapter began with. Leslie Townsend was eager to try out her 'new anatomy' after her vaginoplasty, wondering, as she used a dildo to keep her neo-vagina open, 'if having sex with a man would feel the same entering me' – a process she describes, in common argot, as 'a hunk to break my cherry.'

⁹² Samantha Besson, 'Review: Jean-François Gaudreault-DesBiens, *Le sexe et le droit. Sur le féminisme juridique de Catharine MacKinnon* (Libér, Montréal, 2001)', in *Canadian Journal of Women and the Law* 13.2 (2001), p.395.

When one did so, she considered that everything was 'about to come full circle.'⁹³ Circles, circuits, the active/passive, penetration/reception loop rolls on as she writes of how she 'almost relinquished myself to him in spirit much more than in body.'⁹⁴ The penetration itself became for Townsend symbolic of her emotional passivity, her giving herself up to a man, her being a woman.

In Paul Hewitt's *A Self-Made Man*, penetration serves much the same symbolic purposes. From the very beginning of his autobiography he makes an explicit link with his masculine gender and the penetration-enabling male body which he so desires. The book begins with his recounting of a fight he had with some rowdy lads on a bus one evening and his realisation that society has begun to read him as a man. 'I stand poised at the gates of manhood,' he writes, 'and the boys are beckoning me in. Beyond lies a whole world of macho ideals. He who dares wins. Although I felt intimidated, the gang couldn't dampen my spirits – my artificial penis is in the post.'⁹⁵ As I noted in Chapter One, for many FTMs the limits of technology meant that an artificial penis was the closest equivalent they would ever get to the MTF vaginoplasty. Nevertheless, the artificial penis was vital to their sense of identity as men, even if it was not their own flesh-and-blood, as the dangerous phalloplasty would have given them. For Paul Hewitt, his penis, artificial or not, was clearly a sign of his ability to 'mix it' with the boys, to live out those 'macho ideals' so boldly summed up in his co-option of the SAS motto, 'he who dares wins.' In this case, it was he who dared to be masculine – to be aggressive in return. For that to be completely convincing even to himself he required a penis. He goes on to explain that this is all part of his transsexuality:

I am a victim of a medical condition invisible to the human eye. Women prefer to be held. I don't. I prefer to hold.⁹⁶

He is using his masculinity (his activity in the implied heterosexual embrace) as a sure sign that he is a man. He writes proudly that he will no longer 'conform in a society defined by rigid

⁹³ Townsend, *Hidden in Plain Sight*, pp.87, 90.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.91.

⁹⁵ Hewitt, *A Self-Made Man*, p.2.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.3.

rules and shallow stereotypes,' by which he means the rules of 'pervasive sex' that insist someone born in a female body is necessarily feminine.⁹⁷ Instead, and apparently without considering the irony, he conforms instead to the rigid rules of the sex circuits in which, when he 'undresses my (female) friends with my eyes, I justify such superficial lust with the fact that I have a lot of catching up to do... I went twenty-three years without a proper sex-life and, after all, boys will be boys.'⁹⁸ He is aware of the need to explain his somewhat crude and lewd actions, but his only recourse in doing so is to shrug his shoulders and flirt with tautology. It's natural to do what comes naturally. A guy's gotta do what a guy's gotta do. It is the same expression of heteronormativity as the FTM transsexual whose thoughts on sex made Deirdre McCloskey tut, 'Yes'.

Lust becomes a theme in *A Self-Made Man*, a self-deprecating theme, but a theme nevertheless. It is a sensation he feels compelled and unable to satisfy. 'A song which springs to mind is "I Can't Get No Satisfaction" by the Rolling Stones.'⁹⁹ *Playboy* incites in him 'feelings of pure sex,' and 'masculine urges are rising up inside of me like molten lava journeying upwards from the core of a volcano.'¹⁰⁰ It is all rendered to appear as though he is not at fault, that this is happening to him externally. 'Distinct feelings of lust overtake me at the most inopportune moments. If I had a willy, it would be permanently erect!'¹⁰¹ When his prosthetic penis finally does come through the post, he describes his hopes for it in a manner that might have come straight out of one of MacKinnon's case studies. The prosthetic, he writes happily, is 'huge!' And so it 'looks like I'm going to have to find a woman who's had six kids and been around the block a few times, lest Herbie and I do some serious structural damage. Slack Alice, come on down!'¹⁰² The casual reference to 'damage' in intercourse (never mind the brutal implications of 'Slack Alice') obviously reflects MacKinnon's suggestion that all penetration is akin in some way to violation, to violence. Yet even here, at the height of his hymn to heterosex, his penis is serving more of a symbolic purpose than a material

⁹⁷ Toril Moi, *What is a Woman?* p.10.

⁹⁸ Hewitt, *A Self-Made Man*, p.16.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.70.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, pp.175, 213.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p.117.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p.161.

one. It is, he admits, 'not necessarily a sexual device, but (a) masculinising one.'¹⁰³ It has given him the ability to signify activity through penetration, just as Cossey's neo-vagina gave her the ability to signify passivity through potentially being raped.

Hewitt and his girlfriend quickly make use of the prosthetic, so that he can 'make love for the first time as a man.' Reading his recollections, the similarities in circuitry to Leslie Townsend's 'first-time' are clear. 'It seemed not to matter that I had no feeling in my penis,' he writes, 'the feeling was all in my head... I had dreamed of the time when we would be a heterosexual couple together at last.'¹⁰⁴ Penetration was symbolic both of the masculine role he had taken on in a heterosexual relationship and of his status as the male body in a heterosexual coupling. This sex circuit functions throughout his autobiography, allowing both his masculinity to seem like a function of his male sex, and his male sex to seem like a function of his masculinity. It is 'perfectly complementary,' as Sinfield says, 'a ratification of heteronormativity.'¹⁰⁵ He briefly suggests that he believes in the equality of the sexes, but quickly dismisses this as 'intellectualising (which) doesn't preclude me from showing certain stereotyped male characteristics... as a child I certainly showed a typical boy's opinion of girls – ie: I thought they were silly.'¹⁰⁶ But 'boys will be boys', as he says.¹⁰⁷ His calling an awareness of gender- or sex-stereotyping 'intellectualising' serves to represent it as made-up, as unnatural. And so he seems, by nature, unable to stop acting in a stereotypically masculine manner – which means he must be a boy, should have a male body. And when he does get that significant body, be it the prosthetic penis, the body hair of which he is so proud, or simply the endocrine injections, it serves in turn to legitimate his masculine gender traits: 'I blame it on the testosterone... There is something very erotic about seeing a woman

¹⁰³ Ibid. It is also a device which he has bought, or consumed. Frank Mort has suggested that late twentieth-century Britain (particularly the 1980s, but also into the 1990s) saw an 'intensification' of the process by which consumer culture affected masculinities, permitting certain purchases and interests (such as fashion, grooming) which had traditionally been feminine, to signify a variety of new ways of being a man. Purchasing a 'masculinising' strap-on dildo through the post may not be precisely the sort of high-street reflection of social changes that Mort writes about, but it is certainly a way of consuming masculinity. See: Frank Mort, *Cultures of Consumption: Masculinities and Social Spaces in Late Twentieth-Century Britain* (London, 1996), p.10.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., p.173.

¹⁰⁵ Sinfield, *On Sexuality and Power*, p.17.

¹⁰⁶ Hewitt, *A Self-Made Man*, p.16.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

at the sink doing the washing-up. It certainly does something for me, anyway! I blame it on the hormones.¹⁰⁸

Of course, there are 'many transgendered people who are gay and lesbian' and no doubt there have been so since transsexuality became a medical possibility.¹⁰⁹ It would be interesting to see if the autobiographies of transsexuals who identified as homosexual confirmed or denied what I have suggested in this chapter. Would their location in masculinist discourses of sexual difference perforce mean that they too made use of heterosexual sex-circuits? Or would their queer sexuality change the symbolic functions of penetration entirely? Leslie Feinberg's semi-autobiographical novel, *Stone Butch Blues* (1993) perhaps begins to give us some insight into the ways in which traditional lesbian divisions between 'butch' and 'femme' shade the ways in which a transsexual crossing and the signification of male and female bodies might be effected.¹¹⁰ In the novel, 'the transsexual is complicated also as a partner... Such relationships may be straight or gay, depending on how you look at it.'¹¹¹ Other transgender activists have recently begun to disavow the entire heteronormative system. For example, Kate Bornstein, the self-styled "Gender Outlaw" writes that she identifies as neither male nor female and, as 'my partner is now going through his gender change, it turns out I'm neither straight nor gay.'¹¹² However, until a gay or lesbian transsexual publishes a full autobiography, the question of sex-circuitry in the life-narrative of a straight-to-homosexual transsexuals (as opposed to a lesbian woman who became a straight man, as is the intimation in *Stone Butch Blues*) will remain unanswered. In exploring the symbolic operation of heterosexual intercourse in transsexual autobiographies, I have attempted to illuminate the ways in which gender and sex legitimate, rather than precede, one another in the signification of man and woman. In the chapter that follows I want to go into greater detail about the work of gender stereotypes, specifically active-masculine and passive-feminine, in this pattern of sex signs.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., pp.70, 123.

¹⁰⁹ Patrick Califia, *Sex Changes: The Politics of Transgenderism* (2nd edn., San Francisco, CA., 2003, orig. edn. 1997), p.209.

¹¹⁰ Leslie Feinberg, *Stone Butch Blues* (reprint with afterword by Leslie Feinberg, Los Angeles, CA., 2003, of orig. edn, 1993), pp.209-226.

¹¹¹ Sinfield, *On Sexuality and Power*, p.20.

¹¹² Cited in Ibid.

Chapter Four
Intercourses 2:
Femininity and Feminism in *Conundrum* and *Crossing*

Pleasures Experienced By Travellers

Contemplating her journey from a male body to a female body, from a public identity as a man to one as a woman, Jan Morris wrote in her 1974 autobiography, *Conundrum*, that:

When I thought about it, I found that I walked, sat, gesticulated altogether in a woman's way... Psychologically I was distinctly less forceful... My scale of vision seemed to contract, and I looked less for the grand sweep than for the telling detail.¹

Mulling over the same subject, but some quarter of a century later, Deirdre McCloskey had this to report in her own memoir, *Crossing* (1999):

After a year of making herself walk like a woman, she has forgotten how to walk like a natural man... The theory of American maleness is that your special woman takes care of you when you're sick, but aside from that you're supposed to do everything alone. Help amongst men is shameful. Among women, help is the point, because it shows love.²

Despite the hundreds of kilometres of ocean, and the twenty-five years of considerable social and sexual upheaval that separated them, both Morris and McCloskey signify their status as women here in precisely the same way: feminine gender roles. Their social activities and ways of thinking are portrayed as passive: Morris is explicitly 'distinctly less forceful', whilst McCloskey abjures the activity of masculine independence and exchange in favour of being helped and being loved.

¹ Jan Morris, *Conundrum* (Reprint, with intro by Jan Morris, London, 2002, orig., 1974), pp.133, 134.

² Deirdre McCloskey, *Crossing* (Chicago, 1999), pp.178, 183.

These gender signs are supported by an apparent grounding in physicality. Their bodily actions also seem to have become gendered. The way they talk and walk is a 'woman's way', and the activities of a 'natural man' have been forgotten, left behind. The passivity that both women make use of to signify themselves as women is a striking reflection of the passivity that other MTF transsexual autobiographers used in order to help signify themselves as heterosexual, and thus as women, also. In the previous chapter I showed how the penetrative mechanics of heterosexual intercourse and the traditional active-masculine / passive-feminine heterosexual relationship roles formed a mutually legitimating circuit which helped to signify transsexuals as man or woman. What I think is striking about McCloskey's co-option of these gender roles is that they seem not only to signify 'woman', but also that there appears to have been little change in what it meant to be a woman in the past two-and-a-half decades. Jan Morris wrote *Conundrum* in the early 1970s, recording a life which had not been much impacted upon by either the 'sexual revolution' or second-wave feminism. Reading *Crossing* twenty-five, thirty, years later, it is difficult to see the influence of either of these major social movements. 'Woman' is still signified by passivity, by the socially-required feminine gender traits of submission, care, and a lack of power and force. Had nothing changed? Were women still the passive creatures that Germaine Greer had told them they were being subjugated as?³

Gender stereotyping is to be found on almost every page of every transsexual autobiography. In this chapter I narrow my focus down to just two autobiographies, *Conundrum* and *Crossing*, in order to concentrate on two major themes in the history of transsexuality and its implications for sexual difference: the use of traditional gender stereotypes in the signification of sex identities, and the reaction of feminist writers to this usage. The two themes are closely related. In her 1999 essay 'What is a Woman?' Toril Moi suggests that an answer to her question (a question which Morris and McCloskey are trying to answer, and which perhaps forms the central plank of second-wave feminist thinking) might be found in the abandonment of the 'sex/gender' division (that is, the 'body/mind' division which legitimates the transsexual cliché of a

³ Marcus Collins, *Modern Love: An Intimate History of Men and Women in Twentieth-Century Britain* (London, 2004), p.183.

'woman born in a man's body') and a reclamation of Simone de Beauvoir's phenomenological assertion that 'one is not born, but rather becomes a woman.'⁴ This 'becoming' is an experiential process of the body-in-the-world which never concludes, and which considers 'both the fact of having a specific kind of body' (i.e.: one 'signified-as' female) and 'the meaning that concrete body has for the situated individual.'⁵ In an open-ended challenge to her own conclusions, she suggested that 'the very concept of the "transsexual" depends on a distinction I think useless for the understanding of lived experience. What would happen if one tried to understand transsexuality in completely different terms?'⁶ The answer, as I suggested in my Introduction, and as I aim to show further in this chapter, is that one would fail fairly quickly and return inexorably to the very division of sex/gender that one had aspired to avoid. One would also see, as I suggested in Chapter Three, that sex and gender actually operate in mutual legitimation. Passive bodies mean passive roles, passive roles mean passive bodies. Together, both mean 'woman.' That 'sex-circuit' may be somewhat closer to Moi's 'embodied' understanding of sexual difference than the more traditional sex/gender binaries she dismisses, but it still requires the two terms to be operative.

Moi writes that 'perhaps most important of all' to any attempt at a non-sex/gender comprehension of transsexuality would be the 'autobiographies, memoirs, and other texts written by transsexuals.'⁷ However, in *Crossing* and *Conundrum*, neither McCloskey nor Morris represents their identity as women outside of the sex/gender circuit. This is not to say that there is nothing more to 'woman' (or 'man' for that matter) than a female body and a passive nature. But it is what is offered to readers of transsexual autobiographies. It is precisely because *Conundrum*, particularly, trades so openly in clichéd notions of what it means to be a woman that it has attracted so much negative attention from feminists – this in addition to the hundreds of newspaper column inches devoted to reviews upon its original publication. *Crossing*, too, though not nearly as well-known as its predecessor, has now begun to be subject to feminist critique. In

⁴ Toril Moi, *'What is a Woman?' And Other Essays* (Oxford, 1999), p.5.

⁵ Ibid. p.81.

⁶ Ibid. p.115.

⁷ Ibid. p.116.

this chapter I intend first to look at the operation of gender stereotyping in both books and secondly to analyse the various critiques of such stereotyping in *Conundrum*. I will then ask whether or not such criticisms still have validity when applied, twenty-five years on, to *Crossing*.

'There was a time when, new to my life as a woman, I tried to forget that I had ever lived as a man, but it has grown on me over the years that this was not only intellectually dishonest but actually rather dull of me.' Thus Jan Morris in her much later, 'non-transsexual' memoir, *Pleasures of a Tangled Life* (1989).⁸ Her admission is important, for it begins to illustrate how, in a chapter about two MTF transsexuals, the question of 'what is a man?' might also be addressed in terms of gender stereotyping. As Morris put it, she needed to accept her old life as a man in order to fully comprehend and enjoy her current life as a woman. 'Now I realised,' she writes, 'that I enjoyed the present largely in reflection to the past; the tangle was part of me, whether I liked it or not, mine were the pleasures experienced by travellers across frontiers.'⁹ Such travellers as Morris and McCloskey, I want to suggest in this chapter, can shine as much light on 'what is a man?' as they can on Moi's opposite question. Both women were, perhaps unusually for MTF transsexuals, extremely successful men *qua* men in their previous lives.¹⁰ As we shall see, James Morris climbed Mount Everest, and Donald McCloskey scaled the even slipperier slopes of the Chicago School of free-market economic theorists. They were both, as men, unquestionably masculine in their public and professional lives. In both *Crossing* and *Conundrum*, it is out of their

⁸ Jan Morris, *Pleasures of a Tangled Life* (London, 1989) p.8. I say 'non-transsexual' because the book addresses her sex-change, and questions of sex-identity, only in passing. It serves, she says, as 'the obverse' to the 'doubts and problems of sexual confusion' which dominated *Conundrum*. It is 'simply about the happy side of my life' and consists mostly of travel vignettes and anecdotes.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Bernice Hausman argues that Morris's success as a man (married, children, good career, armed service), 'deviates from the transsexual "official story" of total failure as a male subject.' Yet as neither Morris nor McCloskey underwent their surgical transformations within the professional remit of the Benjaminian Standards of Transsexual Care (which, as I pointed out in my Introduction, demand the 'official story' of failure), the deviation is hardly remarkable. They transitioned comparatively late in their lives, yes, but it is baffling to think that their success in one socially-prescribed role somehow makes their desire to take on its polar opposite seem deviant. Better, I would suggest, to see their stories as statistically unusual in their truncated chronological development, but otherwise the same tales of 'sex-change' and a 'woman trapped in a man's body' as seen in April Ashley's *Odyssey*, Caroline Cossey's *My Story* and Julia Grant's *Just Julia*. See Bernice Hausman, *Changing Sex: Transsexualism, Technology and the Idea of Gender* (Durham, NC., 1995), p.163.

experiences of convincing, successful masculinity, that their notions of equally convincing and successful femininity are spun. Of course, it becomes necessary for them to abjure that original success. McCloskey apologises for 'romanticizing sometimes the goodness of women and criticizing sometimes the badness of men. It's how I felt at the time... In contrasting how men and women "are" I do not mean to recruit stereotypes or essentialisms that have been used to the disadvantage of other women.'¹¹ Yet I would argue that she in fact does, because 'at the time' gender stereotypes were the most understandable languages of sexual difference that she could employ. It was not just how she felt, it was what was available to her, and to Morris, also. There is a curious echo of Morris's later memoir in McCloskey's first when she writes that 'it would be impossible to recount every single thing about your hour just passed, tiny things that illustrate character or position, much less tell every single thing about three years, or one side of a tangled life.'¹² Both women, it seems, had pleasures in their tangled lives, and the greatest of those pleasures was, as they happily admitted, was acting like a woman and being treated like one in return. Acting feminine and being femininised, with sometimes the one preceding the other. I want now to explore further some of these incidents and what they meant for the signification of 'man' and 'woman' in *Conundrum* and *Crossing*.

Her Inferiority Is Her Privilege

In her discussion of *Conundrum* and its author, the MTF transsexual academic and author Jennifer Finney Boylan writes that Jan Morris 'emerged at a time when the culture, American culture anyhow, was first turning its attention toward the issue of civil rights for gays and lesbians. The time had come to add transsexuality to the rock pile, and add it she did.'¹³ Morris herself seems to sense that she had made her transition at a time of considerable sexual and social upheaval, most notably 'women's liberation' – meaning both the organised movement and the far more general, widespread (though by no means total) amelioration of the position and status of

¹¹ McCloskey, *Crossing*, p.xiv.

¹² Ibid. p.xv.

¹³ Jennifer Finney Boylan, *She's Not There: A Life in Two Genders* (Broadway Books, New York, NY., 2003), p.245.

women in western society.¹⁴ Aware of these apparent trends in social and sexual liberalism, Morris nevertheless thought that they had somehow passed her by. Positioning herself very firmly in the context of 1974, she writes:

We are told that the social gap between the sexes is narrowing, but I can only report that having, in the second half of the twentieth century experienced life in both roles, there seems to me to be no aspect of existence, no moment of the day, no contact, no arrangement, no response, which is not different for men than it is for women.¹⁵

In 'What is a Woman?' Moi delineates a school of thinking she calls 'pervasive sex' – the belief, held by nineteenth century masculinist scientists and contemporary evolutionary biologists alike, that feminine gender is a function of the female body. With this declaration, Morris subscribes to the school of pervasive gender. It is her social interactions which mark her out as a woman, which separate her from the men. Deirdre McCloskey would perhaps be another member of the school. She dedicates an entire chapter of *Crossing*, called 'Differences', to those same social interactions. She provides a veritable catalogue of her feminine gender stereotypes: she 'is worse at telling jokes', 'she likes cooking', 'she chooses clothing with an eye', 'her color memory and color vocabulary are a little better', and 'she cries... like other women being much more often than a man on the verge of tears.'¹⁶ As I said, twenty-five years later, with all the supposed benefits of the sexual revolution, women's liberation, gay pride *et alia*, it is somewhat startling to find McCloskey repeating almost precisely the same gender clichés as Morris.

Or perhaps it is not startling at all. There has long existed in feminist criticism the notion that the 'sexual revolution' was not an unqualified success. Particularly, the critique focused upon the assertion that the revolution merely meant that women could no longer say 'no' to sex, and

¹⁴ On the 'movement' see Susan Brownmiller, *In Our Time: Memoir of a Revolution* (New York, NY., 1999).

¹⁵ Morris, *Conundrum*, p.130.

¹⁶ McCloskey, *Crossing*, pp.256, 255.

were thus rendered passive in a new way, rather than empowered.¹⁷ The earliest suggestion of this is usually thought to have been Anselma Dell Olio's 1972 article in *Ms. Magazine*, 'The Sexual Revolution Wasn't Our War', and it found wider acceptance in Shere Hite's bestselling sexual census, *The Hite Report* in 1976.¹⁸ More recently, it has found new life in Ariel Levy's *Female Chauvinist Pigs* (2005) in which the author argues that contemporary, 'liberated' woman does little more than the work men once did: make sex objects of herself and other women.¹⁹ These rather gloomy assessments have, of course, not gone unchallenged by other feminists (Naomi Wolf, Lynne Segal, Ros Coward) unwilling to see defeat in abortion rights, access to birth control, liberalised divorce laws, and far greater educational and career opportunities than ever before.²⁰ The latest defence of the sexual revolution, particularly 'the impact of the oral contraceptive pill on women's sexuality' has been Hera Cook's *The Long Sexual Revolution* (2004), in which she argues that the pill allowed 'many young women of my generation' to enjoy 'extensive sexual experimentation. Only a decade or so earlier, such casual, low-risk sexual activity had not been possible for young women.'²¹ That, coupled with far greater knowledge about sexual intercourse and reproduction constitutes, in Cook's eyes, a definite triumph, for both are 'moves away from the tight sexual control' that had gone before.²² Yet even accepting Cook's

¹⁷ Collins, *Modern Love*, pp.183-187.

¹⁸ Anselma Dell Olio, 'The Sexual Revolution Wasn't Our War' in Francine Klagsbrun (ed.), *The First Ms. Reader* (New York, NY., 1973). Shere Hite, *The Hite Report: A Nationwide Study on Female Sexuality* (New York, NY., 1976).

¹⁹ Ariel Levy, *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture* (New York, NY., 2005). See also, Pamela Paul, *Pornified: How Pornography Is Transforming Our Lives, Our Relationships, and Our Families* (New York, NY., 2005) in which the author details the seeming ubiquity of pornographic images (particularly of women) in twenty-first century America. Both Levy's and Paul's books are expressly feminist in their discussion of the failures of sexual liberation, and are still hopeful that promises might yet be fulfilled. Quite to the contrary, however, is Ben Shapiro, *Porn Generation: How Social Liberalism is Corrupting Our Future* (Lanham, MD., 2005), which is avowedly conservative in tone ('the real face of tax-payer funded sex education: nine-year olds learning about condoms') and sees sexual liberalism *per se* as problematic, rather than the contexts/effects of sexual liberalism.

²⁰ See, for example, Naomi Wolf, *Fire With Fire: The New Female Power And How It Will Change The 21st Century* (New York, NY., 1993), Lynne Segal, *Straight Sex: The Politics of Pleasure* (Virago, London, 1994), id., *Slow Motion: Changing Masculinities, Changing Men* (London, 1994), Ros Coward, *Female Desire* (London, 1994). It is worth noting that none of these writers see sexual liberation as unproblematic, for example, Lynne Segal's *Is the Future Female? Troubled Thoughts on Contemporary Feminism* (London, 1994).

²¹ Hera Cook, *The Long Sexual Revolution: English Women, Sex, and Contraception, 1800-1975* (Oxford, 2005) pp.1-2.

²² *Ibid.* p.325

argument that there was a revolution in sexual knowledge (and thus in sexual practice, as facilitated by the pill and other contraceptives), it does not necessarily follow that there was also a revolution in sexual difference. Indeed, her whole project is founded on the unquestioned assumption that the heterosexual couple in her period of study was made up of a man and a woman. Such an assumption speaks I think to a powerful continuity in notions of sexual difference in the twentieth-century. It seems entirely possible, reading *Conundrum* and *Crossing*, that the 'sexual revolution' did not do much to change gender as a signifier of sex-identity.

Jan Morris had many successes as the man, James. He served in the British Army (9th Queen's Royal Lancers), married, and fathered four children. He was one of the most highly regarded travel-writers of the post-war period, writing a dozen bestselling books, including now classic guides to Oxford and, most famously, Venice.²³ For two decades James Morris enjoyed 'international acclaim' and 'world-wide' recognition.²⁴ Yet it was neither dreaming spires nor gondolas that first made James Morris a success. It was Mount Everest and his exclusive story of its conquest by Tensing Norgay and Edmund Hilary in 1957. Then a cub reporter for the *Times* of London, seemingly dubiously assigned to a thankless task, he managed to scoop the entire world's press with the story, just in time for the coronation of Elizabeth II. It was a genuine journalistic coup, which as fellow reporter, David Holden, wrote, 'is now a Fleet Street legend.'²⁵ It was a tale of encoded telegrams, bribed officials and very British pluck ('A radio station! At Namche! Almost within sight of the mountain... I helped myself to a humbug').²⁶ Indeed, 'the story of the news from Everest' was almost as thrilling as the news itself, as Morris noted a year later in *Coronation Everest*.

²³ Jennifer Finney Boylan describes Morris's *Venice* as 'still the best book on the subject.' Jennifer Finney Boylan, *She's Not There: A Life in Two Genders* (New York, 2003), p.245.

²⁴ Paul Clements, *Jan Morris* (Cardiff, 1998), p.49.

²⁵ David Holden, 'James and Jan', *New York Times Magazine*, 17 March 1974, p.19.

²⁶ James Morris, *Coronation Everest* (London, 1958), p.40. See also: Peter H. Hansen, 'Coronation Everest: Empire and Commonwealth in the "Second Elizabethan Age"' in Stuart Ward (ed.), *British Cultural and Imperial Decline* (Manchester, 2001), pp.57-72. Hansen has also argued that mountaineering was a deliberate demonstration of modernity. In Morris's case, it becomes a demonstration of masculinity. See: Hansen, 'Modern Mountains: the Performative Consciousness of Modernity in Britain, 1870-1940' in Martin J. Daunton and Bernhard Rieger (eds), *Meanings of Modernity: Britain in the Age of Imperialism and World Wars* (Oxford, 2001), pp.185-202.

There have perhaps been greater adventures than Everest (and there are certainly greater to come); but none have culminated so romantically – the two small figures on the summit linked by such devious means with the trumpets, the golden coaches, the splendid gowns, the heralds... Drake himself could not have timed his gallantries more grandly.²⁷

The story did not just make his name, it made his image also. Holden, again: 'it marked him for life... it gave him a romantic image of sterling manhood that could never be forgotten. The lean, stubble-chinned chronicler of the Everest climbers, wiry of body and so confident of mind, became, so to speak, his life-long *Döppleganger*. It was still there to haunt him, 20 years later, as the first thing that most people thought of and exclaimed over when they heard that James Morris had become a woman.'²⁸ Morris, too, was aware of just how powerfully masculine the whole experience had been. 'Everest,' she wrote in *Conundrum*, 'taught me new meanings of maleness, and emphasized once more my inner dichotomy.'²⁹ These 'new meanings,' I want to suggest, were precisely what I showed in the preceding chapter – social gender roles mutually legitimated by notions of the sexed body. Recalling the ascent of Everest (which James made more than half-way), she wrote of the 'male brilliance', grounding masculine traits in male physicality, and explaining male physicality in masculine terms:

But imagine now the young man's condition. First he is constant against the inconstant background. His body is running not in gusts and squalls but at a steady high speed. He actually tingles with strength and energy... his body has no spare weight upon it, only muscles made supple by exercise... He is the master. He feels that

²⁷ Ibid., p.17.

²⁸ Holden, 'James and Jan', pp.19, 78.

²⁹ Morris, *Conundrum*, p.75.

anything is possible to him... His mind, like his body, is tuned to the job and will not splutter or falter. *It is that feeling of unfluctuating control, I think, that women cannot share*, and it springs of course not from the intellect or the personality, nor even so much from the upbringing, but specifically from the body. The male body may be ungenerous, even uncreative in the deepest kind, but when it is working properly it is a marvelous thing to inhabit.³⁰

At first glance, this seems to be a lesson from Moi's school of pervasive sex, with the masculine attributes of control, strength, and constancy, stemming 'specifically from the body.' Yet on closer inspection it seems that simultaneously with this, in the words of Judith Butler, sex 'was already gender.'³¹ The male body presented to us by Morris is only identifiable as male because it is defined by masculine metaphors. It is steady and runs at speed rather than in irrational gusts and squalls. It is dependable and highly functioning, its muscles are supple and powerful. All this is masculine discourse, the establishment of sex as pervasive, as 'prediscursive.'³² Yet Morris, whose word we can hardly dismiss in the matter, clearly saw a role for the body in the construction of masculinity. Once again it seems to me that both can stand. In this extract – one of the key passages in *Conundrum* – it is possible to see the reliance of sex on gender, and of gender on sex. Just as masculine notions of strength and dominance defined (and were defined) by the male part in heterosexual intercourse in FTM autobiographies, so does Morris use masculinity to create a male body, and uses the male body to explain masculinities. It is precisely against this that she casts her female self. Describing the intense sequence of hormonal therapy she underwent prior to surgery, she writes of a 'stripping away of the rough hide in which the male person is clad. I do not mean merely the body hair, nor even the leatheriness of the skin, not all the hard protrusions of muscle: all these indeed vanished over the next few years, but there went with them something less tangible, too, which I now know to be specifically male – a kind of

³⁰ Ibid., p.71, my emphasis.

³¹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York, NY., 1991, 2nd edn., with Preface by Judith Butler, 1999), p.11.

³² Ibid.

unseen layer of accumulated resilience, which provides a shield for the male of the species, but at the same time deadens the sensations of the body.³³ A circuit once more: is the skin rough because it is male, or male because it is rough? The physical (sex) traits of her male body (muscular, leathery) are conflated with the social (gender) traits of masculinity (tough, armoured, unfeeling). As this circuitous strip continued, she writes that,

I was far lighter in weight, but I was lighter in motion, too. Not so brilliantly precipitate as I had been on Everest, but airier, springier. It was as though my centre of gravity had shifted, making me more delicate or subtle of balance.³⁴

In place of the masculine traits of hardiness, control, and certainty (and their male physical mirrors), Morris gained the feminine traits of softness, delicacy, and inconstancy (and their female physical mirrors). These she could then use to signify herself as a woman.

In her new life as a woman, Morris quickly embraced what she well realised were the socially constructed conventions of womanhood. 'Men,' she wrote, deploying them as a useful Other, 'treated me more as a junior... and so, addressed every day of my life as an inferior, involuntarily, month-by-month, I accepted the condition. I discovered that even now men prefer women to be less informed, less able, less talkative, and certainly less self-centred than they are, so generally I obliged them.'³⁵ The feminine gender she had gained in abandoning her masculinity, her 'male brilliance', was not enough. She needed also to be feminised by other people. 'The more I was treated as a woman, the more woman I became... If I was assumed to be incompetent at reversing cars, oddly incompetent I found myself becoming. If a case was thought too heavy for me, inexplicably I found it so myself.'³⁶ Again and again in *Conundrum*, the social construction of Jan Morris the woman is linked to her female body. As I noted in Chapter

³³ Morris, *Conundrum*, pp.92-93.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p.93.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p.131.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p.130.

One, she suggested that the removal of her 'potent' and 'positive' penis made her 'more ready to be led, more passive.'³⁷ Where once her male body was 'made to push and initiate' her new body is 'made to yield and accept, and the outside change has had its inner consequences.'³⁸ Though she sees the 'outside change' (her castration and vaginoplasty) as resulting in a change to her 'inner' self (her gender), she simultaneously uses the feminine symbolism of that inner self (yielding, accepting, *passive*) to explain that outside change. She is surgically constructed and socially constructed as a woman, and so professes to enjoy being 'patronised by illiterate garage men' and 'humoured' by the wine waiter, where once he would have deferred to 'Sir's' masculine knowledge.³⁹

In *Conundrum*, Morris demonstrates occasional flashes of feminist sympathy, writing that 'the condescension of men could be infuriating.' Such declarations are few and far between, however, and serve mainly to signify once more how she is femininised by the men she meets. Being assumed incapable 'was of course by no means all unpleasant... the courtesies were very welcome. If it was annoying to be thought incapable of buying a second-class return to Liverpool, it was quite nice to have it done for one anyway.'⁴⁰ Indeed, Morris did not see this patronage, this socially enforced passivity, as particularly negative, or limiting. 'People are usually far kinder to women, and society is more indulgent too... She can speak more trenchantly, for she is less likely to be answered back... her frailty is her strength, her inferiority her privilege.'⁴¹ It was the fight against such everyday belittlements and structural indignities that would, as we shall see, fuel feminist criticisms of *Conundrum*, but for Morris such diminutions were the whole point. Her aim as a transsexual was to be a woman, the woman she had always known herself to be. What better way to signify her success in this, than in being openly treated as one in everyday situations? Tellingly, she calls it a 'kind of opportunist submission.'⁴² She had waited and wanted all her life to be treated as a woman, and so when a male London taxi driver kissed her,

³⁷ Ibid., p.133.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid., p.131.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid., p.132.

⁴² Ibid.

uninvited, called her a 'good girl' and patted her on the bottom, 'all I did was blush.'⁴³ She had been taken advantage of. She had made it.

Twenty-five years later, and Deirdre McCloskey feels that she, too, had made it as a woman when she is 'treated as one of the tribe.' Initially, her thoughts on what makes up the tribe seem to suggest that the intervening time between her *Crossing* and Morris's *Conundrum* have had some positive impact on sexual difference:

Nothing is essential... You can be a masculine woman, and by some stereotypes many women are, yet still be treated as one of the tribe. No piece of conventionally feminine behaviour is essential if the overall effect makes you accepted in the tribe. Biology is not decisive. Big hips, small frame, high voice, hairless face, sexual interest in men, more-than-male amounts of sympathy and readiness to cry: we all know women who vary on these dimensions, in this direction or that, but who are still part of the tribe.⁴⁴

But the statement requires, I think, some parsing. We are told that 'nothing is essential', yet it quickly becomes apparent that something is, in fact essential: 'the overall effect.' Biology, too, is 'not decisive' yet all of her 'conventional feminine' behaviours together would not allow someone to be taken as part of the 'woman' tribe were they lacking the physiological form of a woman. This last is precisely why McCloskey, and other MTF transsexuals, undergo the castration-vaginoplasty procedure – to fix their sex with their gender, and together have them signify themselves as women. 'You treat yourself as one of the tribe, too,' writes McCloskey. Her way of doing this, throughout *Crossing* is to deploy the same sorts of stereotypes that Jan Morris did a quarter of a century before her. She too, sees the social construction, sees them as cliché, sees

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ McCloskey, *Crossing*, p.176.

the politics behind them, but uses them anyway because it is exactly what she has been trying to do all along.

McCloskey was, and still is, a well-known and highly respected academic, and her autobiography displays more than a passing familiarity with the tropes and themes of gender studies. A transsexual, she writes, comes to know the social construction of gender 'with unusual vividness. She does it for a living.'⁴⁵ She seems to know the theory also, as here, where she explains the changes in her behaviour since joining the tribe:

So she gave up male privileges. They exist, as she had known theoretically as Donald and she slowly found experientially as Deirdre, with her girlfriends bitterly emphasizing it. Simone de Beauvoir traces the diversion of privilege to adolescence, especially the shock of menstruation – "I do not have control over my own body" – and the increase in physical strength of boys, and behind their strength the knowledge of manly dominance.⁴⁶

As with Morris, as with the memoir writing on heterosexuality, the social deprivileging of women is explained by the physical power of men. McCloskey seems very aware of the role male power plays in this, noting how 'the freedom to wander' was one of the male privileges she had given up as a woman. Where Donald would once have walked straight across an empty park, Deirdre 'carefully stayed upon the proper paths. Violating the proprieties says to men that you are an unusual woman, which excites their interest in a dangerous way.'⁴⁷ Just as Jan Morris connects her lack of forcefulness to her lack of a penis, so, in a way, does McCloskey. It is fear of rape which keeps McCloskey on the 'proper path', just as it did to Caroline Cossey in the previous chapter. We might recall Susan Brownmiller on rape as 'a conscious process of intimidation by

⁴⁵ Ibid., p.xv.

⁴⁶ Ibid., pp. 209-210.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

which *all* men keep *all* women in a state of fear.⁴⁸ McCloskey is not endorsing this generalisation, but she *is* positioning herself alongside 'all women' in signifying herself as the potential victim of sexual violence. It is perhaps perfectly sensible not to walk in dangerous areas, but for McCloskey it must necessarily be perfectly feminine also.

McCloskey's citation of Beauvoir on girls in adolescence is interesting because it opens up the issue of gender as a learnt/taught behaviour. She herself is explicit about this pedagogy, writing of how she 'watches other women in her culture for characteristic gestures and practicing them on the spot.'⁴⁹ The gestures she learns are significant. Here she is on deportment:

'Never stand manlike with you feet parallel and legs spread wide... When sitting cross your legs... keep your knees together when you sit... If your feet are not crossed when sitting, keep your legs together from feet to knees. "Take up less space" is one formula, another is "keep your wrists loose" and still another "keep your elbows close to your body.

This is revealing in the striking way in which it mirrors Iris Marion Young's famous essay, 'Throwing Like a Girl.' In the essay, Young dissects the everyday ways by which girls are made to constrict their movements in order to be perceived of as 'ladylike' and 'feminine.' She writes:

There is a specific positive style of feminine body comportment and movement which is learned as the girl comes to understand that she is a girl... walking like a girl, tilting her head like a girl, standing and sitting like a girl, gesturing like a girl, and so on. The girl learns actively to hamper her movements. She is told that she must be careful not to get hurt, not to get dirty, not to tear her clothes... The more a girl

⁴⁸ Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* (New York, NY., 1975), p.15.

⁴⁹ McCloskey, *Crossing*, p.160.

assumes her status as feminine, the more she takes herself to be fragile and immobile.⁵⁰

And indeed, McCloskey sees it just like this. It is not, she reminds us, easy to learn how to be a woman, for 'the formulas are hard to apply, like formal grammatical rules. Imitate, imitate, the way girls learn it.'⁵¹ In both *Crossing* and 'Throwing', gender is learnt 'on' the body, with feminine passivity being embodied in the circumscribed movements of Young's hypothetical girls and McCloskey herself. Young suggests that this gendering does not stem from biology, 'and certainly not (from) a mysterious feminine essence. Rather they have their source in the peculiar *situation* of women as conditioned by sexist oppression.'⁵² This notion of a 'situation' recalls Toril Moi's phenomenological analysis of 'what is a woman?' Moi seeks, as we have seen, a reclamation of Beauvoir's work that would enable feminists to move beyond what she feels is the limiting binary of sex/gender. Young explicitly grounds her work in the phenomenological philosophy of Merleau-Ponty, and there is a point at which it rather seems that *Crossing* does, too:

At one level, I have found, gender is "deeply" superficial, a performance, something that must be studied and learned. We are our masks... "doing gender", a way of being in the world learned over the decades even by the other gender: just do the opposite of "being a man"... Doing gender can be viewed as an accretion of learned habits, learned so well they feel like external conditions, merely the way things are.⁵³

⁵⁰ Iris Marion Young, 'Throwing Like a Girl' in Donn Welton (ed.), *Body and Flesh: A Philosophical Reader* (Oxford, 1998), p.270. There is also an echo here, of Morris's statement 'addressed everyday of my life as an inferior, involuntarily, month by month, I accepted the condition.,' *Conundrum*, p.131.

⁵¹ McCloskey, *Crossing*, p.161.

⁵² Young, 'Throwing', p.269.

⁵³ McCloskey, *Crossing*, p.84.

But this passage is also confusing. It is, on one reading, a phenomenological statement – that gender traits are a result of a woman's 'being in the world'. On another, it seems 'poststructural' in so far as gender becomes a performance of which the performer is not entirely aware. Gender has been made 'already-there', or 'prediscursive' as Butler would have it.⁵⁴ On yet another level, gender is very obviously socially constructed, and then 'done' by a 'prediscursively' sexed body. Ultimately, the phrase 'we are our masks' could mean all of these things, for in a transsexual autobiography any sign of 'woman' which works for the reader will suffice. It is, after all, 'the overall effect' which counts. Whilst it contains some of Lynne Segal's 'many heterosexualities', *Crossing* (and *Conundrum*, for that matter) is poor evidence with which to corroborate Moi's suggestion that 'our subjectivity is always embodied, but our bodies do not only bear the mark of sex'.⁵⁵ Whilst McCloskey is also 'white' and 'middle class' (bourgeois, even), and 'professional' and an 'economist' and 'American', none of these markings are given much weight in the signification of herself as a woman in her autobiography. She returns, again and again, to sex (her vaginoplasty especially) and to gender, the performance she has had to learn in order to make her newly designed body acceptable to the tribe.

In few places is McCloskey's dependence upon gender stereotypes as sex-signs more apparent than in her constant disavowal of her former self-as-a-man, Donald, and of straight masculinity in general. 'You can't,' she writes, 'change your gender in private', which might serve as an acknowledgment that the whole affair requires a public Other against which she can signify herself as woman. She dwells, for example, on the fact that 'men live in a world of violence pitted against violence... but she started to forget the actual experience. She forgot what it was like not to understand relationships because you find them boring.'⁵⁶ She moves seamlessly from the violence and aggression of masculinity to the emotionality and care of femininity. Women 'learn the importance of graceful living... of playing house intently with the best silverware and glasswear for a simple evening meal. Straight men viewed such gestures as alright, maybe, but a

⁵⁴ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p.11.

⁵⁵ Lynne Segal, *Straight Sex: The Politics of Pleasure* (London, 1994), p.260; Moi, *What is a Woman?* p.59.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p.209.

trifle silly, don't you think?'⁵⁷ Just like Morris, McCloskey uses her experiences as a man, 'in that most masculine category of all, the top macho occupation, college professor', to show that she was a woman, really.⁵⁸ For example, at a meeting of the Economic History Association, she recalls Donald showing off 'his prowess in football, dropping to a three-point stance in the lobby, guy style. *Women don't do that kind of thing*, he thought as he did it.'⁵⁹ It is out of her recollections of the high-flying world of tenured academia that McCloskey makes the most of masculine stereotyping. Particularly striking is her portrayal of the way men present themselves professionally. Basically, she suggests, men are defined by their self-absorption in social interactions. Whilst still Donald, she marveled at the 'self-deprecating style women use' in conversation, '*Unlike the boasting of my tribe.*'⁶⁰ And so, in order to use gender to signify herself as a woman, she develops 'an aversion to the "io, io", the "me, me" of men's conversation.'⁶¹ She represents masculine discourse as aggressive, thrusting, whilst feminine discourse is portrayed as relational, accepting. After she published a paper in a well-known Economics journal, McCloskey was 'amused to get a little stack of letters... from male economists saying "Yes, I agree, and in fact here is a copy of *my* paper on the subject."⁶² She saw this as a gendered phenomenon"

They aren't listening*, she thought, *as boys often don't in the excitement of the sandbox. I have come upon a criticism of modern economics that makes the field seem boyishly silly, but the boys can't see the silliness and draw proud attention to their new sandcastles. Look, Aunt Deirdre, look at what I have done. io, io.⁶³

⁵⁷ Ibid., p.211.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p.88. The quotation is from the letter McCloskey sent to her colleagues at the University of Iowa, explaining her transition.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p.64.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p.54.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid., p.179.

⁶³ Ibid. Again, the bold typeface is McCloskey's.

In taking on the role of the indulgent, patient Aunt, McCloskey directly contrasts her own, generous, understanding, femininity with her men colleagues' braying, individualistic, egotistical masculinity.⁶⁴ At faculty meetings, she 'found herself exchanging significant glances with the chair and the other women about the little boy behaviour of the men, *io, io*.'⁶⁵

Abjuring this masculinity, McCloskey embraces wholeheartedly its polar opposite, a seriously stereotyped view of femininity. In one of her closing chapters, McCloskey lists forty or so 'Differences' between herself as a woman and herself as a man. Alongside no longer being able to tell jokes, she 'chooses clothing with an eye, imagining outfits from her closet or the store rack' and 'works at remembering what people wear,' neither of which Donald had an interest in. She 'listens intently' and 'is more alert to the relational details in stories' – all part of her rejection of the *io, io*, of male interaction. She 'drives slower and less aggressively' whilst navigating by 'landmark and feel rather than by direction or map.' Still she feels 'duty bound to do the dishes' and 'she likes cooking... when you cook for pleasure it is a pleasure, something Donald had not allowed. Too close to the feminine.' She 'dotes on children' and her maternal instincts spread towards cute dogs, too; Janie, her Yorkshire terrier, '*My Baby*.' She stops 'paying attention to guy things – such as cars and sports and war stories... She is uninterested in sports and finds the sports pages pointless.'⁶⁶ These are sit-com, stand-up, clichés, but therein lies their very utility to McCloskey – fictions of natural gender learned so well by her audience that, when culturally transmitted in a patriarchal society, they seem 'merely the way things are.' Always,

⁶⁴ In casting herself as an Aunt rather than a Mother figure, McCloskey is, I think, trying to avoid accusations that she is laying claim to the reproductive potential of the female body. Stephan Ziliak, once one of McCloskey's graduate students, suggests that 'Aunt Deirdre' is a 'self-consciously' comic creation, who 'yells from the kitchen... while she delivers under it all a serious message.' On the other hand, Frances Wooley simply states that 'When McCloskey assumes the persona of "Aunt Deirdre"... the stereotypical tone makes me cringe.' Both have some truth to them. It is both comic and cringeworthy, and in *Crossing*, the serious point is not about statistical significance, but about the sexual signification. Stephan Thomas Ziliak, 'Introduction: D.N. McCloskey and the Rhetoric of a Scientific Economics', in Deirdre McCloskey & Stephan Thomas Ziliak (eds), *Measurement and Meaning in Economics* (Northampton, MA., 2001) p.xvii. Frances Wooley, 'Book Reviews: *The Vices of Economists – The Virtues of the Bourgeoisie* and *How to be Human – Though and Economist*, both by Deirdre N. McCloskey' in *Feminist Economics* 7.2 (2001), p.126.

⁶⁵ McCloskey, *Crossing*, p.133.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.255-261

though, they are clichés that she has had to learn in order to be accepted as one of the tribe – an acceptance that she knows she can only gain through also changing her sex. As I quoted her in Chapter One, ‘the no-penis criterion is the most powerful rhetoric for acceptance of behaviour that otherwise does not inspire behaviour.’⁶⁷ Sex validates gender, and it was gender which made her want to change her sex. Together, both serve to signify her as ‘woman.’

Other than the academic subtleties of some of McCloskey’s digressions, her discussion of gender as a sex sign is almost identical to Jan Morris’s. In his *New York Times* review of *Conundrum*, Anatole Broyard wrote that though the book was ‘always on the verge of opening some grand perspective, it is far too special to justify any helpful generalizations.’⁶⁸ By placing *Conundrum* at one end of a chronological spectrum, and *Crossing* at the other, I have aimed here to ‘open’ some perspective on the impact of the sexual revolution on notions of sexual difference as signified through gender. I make no argument that this perspective is ‘grand’, but I do think it evident that the mirror images both books make of each other are telling. There existed, in the later decades of the twentieth century, a hope that such stereotyping might be losing some of its potency. *Conundrum* and *Crossing* undermined that belief. I want now to explore the ways in which critics responded to both books and the ways in which they seemed to work against some of the sexual and social tides of their era.

It Would Be a Man, Wouldn’t It?

Upon its release in 1974, *Conundrum* received ‘a huge amount of attention in the press’ with feature reviews in all the major newspapers and news magazines, both in Britain and the United States.⁶⁹ Paul Clements, Jan Morris’s literary biographer, claims that the intense interest in *Conundrum* was due to Morris being ‘one of the first transsexuals to emerge publicly and reveal her story.’⁷⁰ This is only half true. As Joanne Meyerowitz has shown, by the 1970s transsexuality and sex-change had been a staple of the American popular press since the end of the World War

⁶⁷ Ibid., p.190.

⁶⁸ Anatole Broyard, ‘Born Into the Wrong Body’, *New York Times*, 9 April 1974, p.39.

⁶⁹ Paul Clements, *Jan Morris* (Cardiff, 1998), p.47.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

II.⁷¹ The British media may not have been quite as *au fait* with the subject, but it was hardly naïve, either. The story of Roberta Cowell, the former RAF man who had become a race-car driving woman, had broken as early as 1952.⁷² And only four years before *Conundrum* was published, the April Ashley 'sex-change divorce trial' had gripped the British public (see Chapter Five). Beyond the prurient tabloid obsession with sex, what really attracted the most attention to Morris was whom she had been before: James. As David Holden pointed out in his *New York Times* interview with her, it was the image of the 'stubbled-cheeked' and heroic chronicler of Everest which had stuck in peoples' minds, and which in turn made the transition seem even more unlikely, even more shocking. Previous 'media transsexuals' such as Christine Jorgensen and April Ashley had conditioned the public into expecting MTF transsexuals to tell a life story of pre-operative effeminacy, of a 'nancy boy' finding the right body. Morris and *Conundrum* bucked that trend. As Jennifer Finney Boylan writes, *Conundrum* showed that 'a transsexual can be mature, wise, dignified and literary. Single-handedly, (the) book demonstrated that transsexuals as a *people* were not lurid, crazy, or marginal, or at least not necessarily.'⁷³ For Boylan, currently a Professor of English at Colby College in Maine, *Conundrum* is 'the best piece of writing ever published on the subject of transsexuality.'⁷⁴

Boylan, though, is writing with her tongue firmly in her cheek, for whilst she is full of admiration for its social and cultural impact, she is referring 'not to Jan Morris's classic 1973 (sic) narrative of her own transition, but to the even more classic trashing of same by Nora Ephron.'⁷⁵ Ephron, who went on to direct movie blockbusters such as *Sleepless in Seattle* (1993) and *You've Got Mail* (1998), was, in the 1970s, one of America's best-known columnists and writers, appearing in publications as diverse as *Ms.*, *GQ*, and *New York*. Her attraction was to have

⁷¹ Joanne Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States* (Cambridge, MA., 2002), pp.51-97.

⁷² Cowell did produce an autobiography, in fact, but in it she maintained that she was hermaphrodite and had spontaneously begun to feminize. She did undergo some reassignment surgeries, but her claim that these merely 'completed' her natural transformation makes it impossible to include her in a study of transsexual autobiography. See: Roberta Cowell, *Roberta Cowell's Story* (London, 1954).

⁷³ Boylan, *She's Not There* p.245

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p.244.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*,

positioned herself as both part of the *zeitgeist* women's liberation movement, and as an witty observer of its impact on American society. Ephron was, in short, appalled by the book and by Morris's notion of what it means to be a woman. Her review hones in on Morris's use of 'sentimental gender judgments for everything' and sarcastically reproduces some of the book's most stereotyped sections.⁷⁶ 'Everything blushes' writes Ephron with unconcealed annoyance about what she considered to be Morris's saccharine love for her new femininity. On Morris's 'womanly' joy in the natural world: 'the only thing she neglects to write in this passage is a little face with a smile on it.'⁷⁷ For Ephron, the major issue with *Conundrum* is its notion of what it means to be a woman. Her retort to Morris's claim to have known, ever since a boy, that she had been a woman in a man's body bears lengthy quotation:

I always wanted to be a girl, too. I, too, felt that I was born into the wrong body, a body that refused, in spite of every imprecation and exercise I could manage, to become anything but the boyish, lean thing it was... I wanted more than anything to be something I will never be – feminine and feminine in the worst way. Submissive. Dependent. Soft-spoken. Coquettish. I was no good at all at any of it, no good at being a girl; on the other hand I am not half bad at being a woman. In contrast, Jan Morris is perfectly awful at being a woman; what she has become instead is precisely what James Morris wanted to become all those years ago. A girl. And worse, a forty-seven-year-old girl. And worst of all, a forty-seven-year-old *Cosmopolitan* girl.⁷⁸

Here, Ephron efficiently dismisses the femininity that Morris so treasured, denying that it has any bearing on what it means to be a woman. As well as questioning Morris's gender stereotypes in this extract, she also parodies the sex circuitry that Morris relied on: her adolescent body, despite

⁷⁶ Nora Ephron, 'Conundrum' in id., *Crazy Salad: Some Things About Women* (New York, NY., 1975), p.199.

⁷⁷ Ibid., p.200.

⁷⁸ Ibid., p.198.

her best efforts, would never be 'submissive' or 'coquettish', her sex would never be described by the socially constructed gender the world had made for her and nor would her sexed body be properly symbolic of the femininity her girlhood self so desperately sought. What is especially interesting is that in her invocation of her girlhood, Ephron hit upon what would be one of the central themes of feminist criticism of transsexuality: that MTFs had not grown up as girls into women, and so could not properly understand the experience. Ephron charges that Morris has skipped all the hard bits about growing up into a woman, and is merely indulging herself in 'mawkish and embarrassing' exaggerations of femininity. In the rest of the book in which her review is collected, *Crazy Salad*, Ephron addresses a number of the issues that were central to the women's liberation movement - the beauty industry, consciousness-raising, political representation, gynaecology, sports participation – finding everywhere that women were breaking out of the old restraints of gender stereotypes, despite what many men thought about it. It is not very surprising then, that when she contemplates Morris, who 'did not in the least mind being patronised by illiterate garage-men if it meant they were going to give me some more trading stamps,' she writes:

And I wonder about all this, wonder how anyone in this day and age can think that this is what being a woman is all about. And as I wonder, I find myself thinking a harsh feminist thought. It would be a man, I think. Well, it would, wouldn't it?⁷⁹

Here she is parodying a comment made by Morris herself in *Conundrum* (when a removal man smashes a vase). Ultimately, Ephron's critique boils down to a belief that 'man' and 'woman' cannot be reduced to the gender essentialisms that are Morris's weapon of choice.⁸⁰ In making

⁷⁹ Ibid., p.201

⁸⁰ Viewing Ephron's own cinematic output, one might imagine that she has slipped more towards Morris's way of thinking. 2005's *Bewitched*, in particular, was criticised for its 'bimbo who can't operate the VCR' heroine whose 'brain cells are as scattered as the plot.' http://www.bbc.co.uk/films/2005/08/03/bewitched_2005_review.shtml (viewed 16 March, 2006)

fun of the clichés that 'riddle' *Conundrum*, Ephron was taking up a trope that would mark out many of its literary reviews.

The calibre of some of the reviewers themselves – Rebecca West, Anatole Broyard, V.S. Pritchett, Cyril Connolly – speaks to just how well-regarded Morris herself had been as a writer when she was James. The great and good of journalism were to review one of their own. Paul Clements calls it 'an exceptional critical reaction,' which is a politick way of putting it, to be sure.⁸¹ These literary reviews were for the most part negative, and were characterised by the same sort of parody and sarcasm that was evident in Ephron's piece. In *The Times*, for example, Cyril Connolly admitted briefly that *Conundrum* was 'well written', but it was also mostly 'superficial'. He then spent most of his review sending Morris up by dwelling on his own, comic castration complex.⁸² Two reviews in the *New York Times* expanded on this ridicule. In the Sunday book review section, Dame Rebecca West seemed to start kindly enough by calling James Morris 'perhaps the finest descriptive writer of our time', but the clue to her true feelings lay in the use of Morris's old name. 'What surprises me about *Conundrum*,' West wrote, 'is that whereas I used to understand every word he wrote when I was a woman and he was a man, now that we are both women, he mystifies me.'⁸³ It was the essentialisms parodied by Ephron that mystified her. 'She sounds', West sniffed, 'not like a woman, but like a man's idea of a woman, and curiously enough, a man not nearly so intelligent as James Morris used to be.'⁸⁴ The week before West's review, Anatole Broyard had written for the 'Books of the Times' section that 'Miss Morris sounds as if she is satisfied with simply *being* a woman, as if her particular condition carried no particular imperatives of its own.'⁸⁵ He noted that these 'imperatives' ought to involve an attempt not to reduce that 'condition' down to gender stereotypes. As he wrote warningly, 'she is now enjoying the small-talk and minor rituals of womanhood – exactly the sort of activities that other women

⁸¹ Clements, *Jan Morris*, p.47.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Rebecca West, 'Male and Female He Made Them', *New York Times Books*, 14 April 1974, p.21.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Anatole Broyard, 'Born Into the Wrong Body', *New York Times*, 9 April 1974, p.39.

have recently come to despise.⁸⁶ For both West and Broyard, *Conundrum* seemed oddly out of touch. They seem, as fellow journalists, to have reacted to this socio-cultural 'tin ear' with something akin to distaste, embarrassment, even.

V.S. Pritchett, writing in the *New Statesman*, also decried the gender clichés that Morris reveled in, but he did so whilst making use of his own essentialisms:

A woman? The handbag swings and the muscles are softening. Women's chats, a woman's interest in clothes, finding men attractive, a pleasure in the fact of being socially cosseted, are coming on. But essentially, Jan is an invented woman, for she has not been formed by the psychic-physical fate and surprise of menstruation or the power-giving possibility of child-bearing.⁸⁷

It was, of course, precisely because medical technology could not provide her with such 'fate' and 'power' that Morris indulged in her swinging handbag. Pritchett, though, did not consider such indulgences significant of woman. His criticisms of *Conundrum*, like West's and Broyard's, seem to be born out of a certain artistic dislike for cliché. He noted, for example, how Morris found it 'womanishly delightful to be surrounded by handsome, high-spirited men.'. This, he suggested, 'strikes one as being less womanish than an assumption of the role of romantic spectator, to be expected in any writer who is likely, whatever his sex, to foster something of the opposite sex in his nature.'⁸⁸ Pritchett apparently considered Morris's transsexuality to be a manifestation of writerly imagination, in which a reliance upon stereotype was as distasteful as expositional prose or clumsy similes. West, too, was scathing about the writing in *Conundrum*. Again, her aesthetic critique was a response to what she perceived as Morris's lack of sexual imagination:

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ V.S. Pritchett, 'Clouded Conundrum', *New Statesman*, 26 April 1974, p.586 (page ref. refers to the bound version of the periodical).

⁸⁸ Ibid.

She overacts to material objects like a woman in a TV commercial, and when Miss Morris writes of the results of her hormonal (sic) treatment, "my small breasts blossomed like blushes" one feels sure she is not a woman. Almost any woman not feeble-minded would know that is a remark that one must leave for other people to make.⁸⁹

West's own essentialisms ('any woman') can be read as parody, like Ephron's. Their parodic purpose was to identify what West considered to be the crassness of Morris's ideas of womanhood. So crass, in fact, that 'I cannot accept *Conundrum* as the story of a true change of sex. Surely this is rather a record of the strange self-treatment for a neurotic condition?'⁹⁰ In part, some of the literary reviews of *Conundrum* do have the ring of moral panic to them, but they are also expressly concerned with the aesthetics of sex as they are with its ethics. The worry for West, Broyard, and Pritchett was not so much that Morris had changed sex, but that she had represented her transition in such clichéd, outmoded terms. As journalists themselves, to see one of the best of their profession produce such 'feeble-minded' work was embarrassing.

It would not do, however, to assume that all reviewers of *Conundrum* were mortified by its representations of womanhood, nor that those representations were invariably seen as old-fashioned or outmoded. Indeed the reason Morris used them was precisely because they would have been widely recognised, easily-read, sex signs. The two major American news magazines, *Time* and *Newsweek* both responded positively to the book, each bestowing upon it a feature-length review. The anonymous *Time* journalist called *Conundrum* 'brief, graceful, and often witty' and commended it heartily to its readers.⁹¹ In *Newsweek*, Lorraine Kisley declared the book to be 'the best first-hand account ever written by a traveler across the boundaries of sex.'⁹² This, she said, was only to be expected of someone with Morris's 'considerable literary reputation.' The reception in these two magazines (both sold in the UK and USA, and each alone with a far larger

⁸⁹ West, 'Male and Female He Made Them'.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Anon., 'Anatomy v. Destiny', *Time*, 22 April 1974, p.26.

⁹² Lorraine Kisley (attr.), 'Across the Frontiers of Sex', *Newsweek*, 22 April 1974, p.74.

circulation than the *New York Times*, *The Times* and the *New Statesman* combined) was very different to that of the literary critics. *Time* took direct issue with West *et alia*, asserting that 'the bemusements of living as a woman after being a man will stir much chatter, but they are the least important and in some ways least interesting aspects of the book.'⁹³ Far more important, agreed both publications, was the triumph of the individual spirit that Morris's journey represented, the Romantic narrative of someone following their dream. Neither *Newsweek* nor *Time* complained that the gender traits that Morris portrayed herself with were clichéd, stereotyped or 'feeble-minded'. Indeed, Kisley wrote that 'by almost any measure, (Morris) has come through with flying colors, and it is difficult not to accept her as a woman. There is nothing artificial or contrived in her gestures or manner. This is a feminine being, and a delightful one at that.'⁹⁴ Clearly, Morris had successfully signified herself as a woman in this arena, having failed to do so for the more literary reviewers. Morris was presenting a vision of femininity that many people, perhaps a majority, recognised. Even Ephron and West acknowledged that this was what she was trying to do. The difference between them and the news weeklies was that they, as avowed feminists, did not appreciate it.⁹⁵ Their harsh criticisms of *Conundrum* might be said to have arisen out of distress at just how very successfully it had co-opted the passive, blushing femininity that still remained the dominant way of signifying 'woman' in American and British culture.

One of the major goals of second-wave feminism had been to overturn that dominance and to replace it with a way of viewing women (and men) that did not rely upon stereotypes. The irritation felt by Rebecca West and Nora Ephron at *Conundrum's* reliance upon gender clichés became a theme in many feminist engagements with transsexuality. Perhaps the most (in)famous of these is Janice Raymond's *The Transsexual Empire* (1979), in which she declared that 'the transsexual only exchanges one stereotype for another, thus reinforcing the fabric by which a

⁹³ Anon., 'Anatomy v. Destiny'.

⁹⁴ Kisley, 'Across the Frontiers of Sex,' p.75.

⁹⁵ Neither *Time* nor *Newsweek* had a particularly strong reputation for equality of opportunity between the sexes and both were subject to unofficial industrial action by their women employees. See Brownmiller, *In Our Time*, pp.136-166.

sexist society is held together.⁹⁶ Raymond cited Morris's *Conundrum* as a particularly egregious example of this, being especially exercised by Morris's comments about being condescended to by waiters and garage mechanics:

What Morris never seems to recognize is that the "second-class citizenship," the inferior position in which women are put by men, is the logical consequence of their acceptance of femininity as a stereotype and mode of relating.⁹⁷

By dealing in gender essentialisms, Raymond argued, Morris aided and abetted the sexist treatment of women. Her review of *Conundrum*, however, differs from Ephron and West's in its critique of Morris's essentialisms, for she does not attempt to parody her. Instead, Raymond insists upon a wholly un-ironic set of competing essentialisms based in biology. The witty mockery of the literary reviews was replaced in *The Transsexual Empire* with an avowedly 'radical' insistence upon the uniqueness of the born-female body. Raymond drew upon the work of Mary Daly, who had insisted that 'the surgeons and hormone therapists of the transsexual kingdom... cannot produce women (because) male-to-constructed-female transsexuals cannot menstruate, they cannot give birth.'⁹⁸ There are shades here of V.S. Pritchett's review; he had called Morris an 'invented woman' who had not experienced menstruation or pregnancy. But his critique focused upon a failure creative imagination, whilst Raymond (and Daly) merely swapped essential gender for essential biology. Theirs was an unintentional parody.

The Transsexual Empire has been widely criticised, most notably by Sandy Stone in the (very parodically-named) essay 'The *Empire* Strikes Back' (1991) and by Patrick Califia in *Sex*

⁹⁶ Janice Raymond, *The Transsexual Empire* (London, 1979), p.xvii. The US version includes the subtitle, *The Making of the She-Male*, (Boston, MA.,1979).

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.89.

⁹⁸ Mary Daly, *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (London, 1979), pp.68, 432-n.33.

Changes (1997).⁹⁹ The criticisms have, ironically, focused upon the very essentialisms that Raymond accused Morris of lacking: Why is it any less reductive to define women by their ability to give birth than their propensity for gossip? Is it not, in fact, even more damaging; for if woman is defined by biology, then surely she can never change? The early responses to *Conundrum*, both positive and negative, suggest that in the mid-to-late 1970s there were as many answers to 'what is a woman?' as there were book reviewers. The contemporary feminist debates had made many people look again at the gender roles that they had taken for granted. For some, seeing them acted out so clearly by a transsexual like Morris only made their 'invented', stereotypical nature more apparent. We are used to thinking that this period was the beginning of the end for such stereotyping, yet as we have seen from Deirdre McCloskey's *Crossing*, it endured.¹⁰⁰ I want now to explore the ways in which the feminist critiques of *Conundrum* might be applied again to *Crossing* and the way McCloskey uses her femininity as a sex sign.

She is Uninterested in Sports

Deirdre McCloskey was also exposed to the radical feminist arguments first made by Janice Raymond in *The Transsexual Empire*. As she recalls in *Crossing*, several women economists refused to be associated with her professionally, citing her lack of essential biological womanhood. At the University of Wisconsin, an unnamed Professor protested that 'This "Deirdre" should not be allowed to speak to the women graduate students on being a woman economist. What does Deirdre know about that?' Aunt Deirdre replies, 'Thank you, dear.'¹⁰¹ In that response, we can see how McCloskey made use of gender stereotypes to counteract what some perceived as her lack of biological sex signs. Ever the academic, McCloskey does her research on what she sarcastically calls, 'the welcoming world of radical feminist women'. She writes:

⁹⁹ Sandy Stone, 'The *Empire* Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto' in Julia Epstein & Kristine Staub (eds), *Body Guards: The Cultural Politics of Gender Ambiguity* (New York, NY., 1991), pp.280-304; Califia, *Sex Changes*, pp.92-108. See also, Carol Riddell, *Divided Sisterhood: A Critical Review of Janice Raymond's "The Transsexual Empire"* (Liverpool, 1980).

¹⁰⁰ On this, see Jeffrey Weeks, *Sexuality and Its Discontents: Meanings, Myths, and Modern Sexualities* (reprint, London, 2004, orig. 1984) pp.17-21.

¹⁰¹ McCloskey, *Crossing*, p.222.

A tiny group of separatist feminists of the second wave, such as Mary Daly, Germaine Greer, Andrea Dworkin, Catherine Millot, Heather Draper, and Janice Raymond make a point of persecuting gender crossers... (they) regard male-to-female crossers as not, in essence, women. That means they are to be excluded, though feminists of the first wave, among whom Deirdre counted herself, or of the third, would say on the contrary that the Essential Woman is herself the problem. If women are essentially this or that, by a biology locked in at birth, it is hard to see how feminism or anything else can ameliorate their condition.¹⁰²

This is the same critique made by Stone and Califia of Raymond, but quite where this enlightened attitude fits with her noting that, after her vaginoplasty, she 'feels duty bound to wash the dishes... drives slower and less aggressively... (and) dotes on every child she meets' is uncertain.¹⁰³ Replacing an essentially biological woman with an essentially socially gendered woman is precisely the charge that was leveled at Morris in the 1970s. McCloskey argues that those gender traits seem essential for her to signify herself as a woman in the society she lives in. In the Preface to *Crossing* she writes that 'I am reporting how the differences in social practice seemed to me, admitting always that the difference might be, as the professors say, "socially constructed."¹⁰⁴ Such an admission, though, tends to seem more like lip service than a continually rigorous analysis when the reader is faced with line after line of unquestioned assertions about what it is like to be a woman. 'She has stopped paying attention to guy things – such as cars and sports and war stories... She is uninterested in sports and finds the sports pages pointless... She no longer thinks of life as a strict social exchange... She reads women novelists, for years *only* women novelists... She takes the woman's side.'¹⁰⁵ An admission of the

¹⁰² Ibid., pp.222-223.

¹⁰³ Ibid., pp.258-259.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., p.xv.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., p.259.

possibility of social construction is not enough to countermand the charge of essentialism if she then essentialises those constructions regardless.

The reviews of *Crossing* were far fewer and far less prominent than *Conundrum*. By the time of its publication at the end of the twentieth century, transsexuality had, as Jan Morris had said of sex in 1974, become 'degraded by publicity, made casual by tolerance.'¹⁰⁶ McCloskey was also far less well-known than Morris. There was a brief, positive review in the *New York Times*, and McCloskey was featured on Dutch television whilst lecturing in Amsterdam.¹⁰⁷ There was no media frenzy such as that which had greeted *Conundrum*. The most passionate engagements with *Crossing* actually came from within the Economics profession itself, specifically from women working within the field of feminist economics. These reviews looked directly to the heart of the 'what is a woman?' question as it applied to McCloskey. Kimberly Christensen writes in the journal, *Feminist Economics* that *Crossing* posed 'fascinating questions about gender' and 'fascinating issues for feminist economists.'¹⁰⁸ She wonders, having pondered McCloskey's litany of feminities, whether changing sex, as McCloskey had would 'ultimately illuminate the biologically based myth at the bottom of our fiercely gendered division of labor and personality?' Or, more worryingly, would:

The sex reassignment surgeries which change the body to match the social role, actually reinforce the idea that one must have a certain kind of body ("female") to act a certain way ("feminine")?¹⁰⁹

Her answer, taken from her reading of *Crossing* is that it 'depends upon the context and rhetorical and political use to which it is put.'¹¹⁰ Christensen considers that although she was not initially

¹⁰⁶ Morris, *Conundrum*, p.145.

¹⁰⁷ Maxine Kumin, 'The Metamorphosis', *New York Times*, 14 November 1999. <http://www.pfc.org.uk/reviews/mcc-nyt.htm> (viewed 17 March 2005); McCloskey, *Crossing*, plate between pp.176,177.

¹⁰⁸ Kimberley Christensen, "'Thank God... I thought for a moment you were going to confess to converting to socialism!": Gender and Identity in Deirdre McCloskey's *Crossing*, *Feminist Economics* 7.2 (2001), p.106.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p.109.

prepared to like *Crossing*, McCloskey writes herself up as 'someone who, by the book's end, rings true as a woman most of the time.'¹¹¹ But only most of the time, for Christensen charges that McCloskey has 'no awareness of male privilege within the economics profession', having not gained her tenured professorships whilst being a woman in a sexist society.¹¹² McCloskey, she says, 'has never had to cope with sexual harassment; the question of child-bearing and the conflicts and hassles of child-rearing.'¹¹³ These seem to be the flip-sides to the gender stereotypes that McCloskey so enjoys. She may well 'dote on children', Christensen argues, but she has never had to interrupt her career to have them or care for them. In her critique, Christensen is not arguing for the biological essentialisms familiar from Raymond's work, but is pointing out how the social structures impinge upon born women's reproductive potential. Frances Wooley makes this point somewhat more sharply in the same journal when she writes that McCloskey is 'divorced from the reality of many women economists lives.'¹¹⁴

The most intriguing of Christensen's feminist critiques of McCloskey is not one that featured in any of the reviews of *Conundrum* in the 1970s. In short, she wonders why changing sex has not changed McCloskey's view of economic theory. In *Crossing*, McCloskey argues that the decision to change sex is not reducible to traditional economic analysis. 'It's identity, stupid. Not cost and benefit.'¹¹⁵ Christensen argues that despite this, McCloskey remains as committed to the mechanics of free-market cost-benefit analysis as she famously was as Donald. Such analyses, she continues, tend to exclude women because their social realities often undermine the assumptions of permanent freedom and self-sufficiency on which the analyses rely.¹¹⁶ Here, Christensen contends that, once again, McCloskey has failed to comprehend the 'real life' of women. It might be said that for Christensen, it is 'lived experience' which forms the 'essentialism' which McCloskey lacks in her gendered signification of 'woman'. Crucially, however, this is not

¹¹⁰ Ibid., p.110.

¹¹¹ Ibid., p.112.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Wooley, 'Book Reviews', p.125.

¹¹⁵ Christensen, "Thank God!", p.113.

¹¹⁶ Christen references Alison Jaggar, *Feminist Politics and Human Nature* (Totowa, NJ., 1983) on this issue.

something that she feels McCloskey is barred from due to biology. It is something that she can learn about and come to appreciate for herself. In many ways, this is the same thing that Ephron was saying about Morris: that she did not understand what the embrace of feminine stereotyping meant if one lived one's life everyday in a position of potential subjugation and belittlement. It is the apparent lack of understanding in *Crossing* that leaves it open to feminist criticisms. McCloskey slips quickly from an awareness of the dangers of feminine stereotyping into a positive embrace of it. The Faculty Dean, upon hearing her decision to change sex, jokes that he can now pay her less. 'Not so funny', she thinks.¹¹⁷ Soon, though, she is reduced to writing things like 'Deirdre later could only sigh, "Men!"' and quoting Edith Wharton, 'Genius is of small use to a woman who does not know how to do her hair.'¹¹⁸ That last could be read as an admission of how much pressure women are under to 'look right' in social situations, but McCloskey deploys it solely in a passage on how much she has come to enjoy wearing make-up and spending time getting ready to leave the house. Few feminists now would charge that looking good is an expression of sexist oppression, but many might say that essentialising it as a sign of womanhood is.

The twenty-five years between the publication of *Conundrum* and the publication of *Crossing* saw great changes in the practice and representation of sexual relations and identities in Britain and America.¹¹⁹ What responses to the autobiographies show, I think, is that whilst there were always several answers to the question, 'what is a woman?', some of those answers were easier to enunciate in public than others. This was especially true for people who changed sex. These two transsexual women, eagerly seeking acceptance and recognition as women, made use of what seemed to them to be the most obvious, most easily-read signs of femininity. These were, for better or worse, clichés. There were those in 1974 who thought these signs

¹¹⁷ McCloskey, *Crossing*, p.93.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.184, 211.

¹¹⁹ Weeks, *Sexuality and Its Discontents*, pp.15-32; Collins, *Modern Love*, pp.167-205; Frank Mort, *Cultures of Consumption: Masculinities and Social Space in Late Twentieth-Century Britain* (London, 1996), pp.149-199; Lesley Hall, *Sex, Gender and Social Change in Britain Since 1880* (London, 2000), pp.185-198; David Allyn, *Make Love Not War: The Sexual Revolution, An Unfettered History* (Boston, MA., 2000), pp.41-60; Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America* (New York, NY., 2000).

outmoded and repressive, just as there were those in 1999 who thought that they rang true, most of the time. Key to understanding the meanings of transsexuality for sexual difference over this period is the fact that whilst the definitions of 'woman' (and 'man') were largely unstable, the sex identities constructed by transsexuals were not. Morris and McCloskey sought to project themselves successfully and permanently as women. That they did so using precisely the same set of gender stereotypes might actually support feminist arguments about their dangerous ubiquity. In both seeing these stereotypes as socially constructed and *then* in essentialising them, McCloskey seems to be a case study in the way in which femininity is made to seem natural and normative to those who would call themselves women. *Conundrum* and *Crossing* are not endorsements of gender stereotyping, they are examples of the way it operates. McCloskey and Morris are not advocating essentialised femininity as a preeminent sex sign of 'woman', but they are representative of a common language of sexual difference which did. What we have seen in this chapter is how that language operates, how it tends to exclude other possibilities, how it shores itself up with claims to nature and normativity. Transsexual autobiographies, and the responses to them, give us insight into how that operation, ultimately, serves to mask its own contingency and social construction.

Chapter Five

"Wife a Man"April Ashley's Divorce Trial and Competing Definitions of Sex in Post-War England**Sex, Not Gender**

The case of *Corbett v. Corbett (otherwise Ashley)*, a petition and response for the annulment of the marriage between Arthur Corbett and April Ashley, was one of the most extraordinary trials in English legal history. At the time of the petition (15 May 1967), the 'no-fault' divorce had yet to become law. As Ashley later wrote in her autobiography, *Odyssey* (1983), 'before the reform of the divorce laws... all divorce proceedings demanded that guilt be affixed to one or other of the parties. A quiet dissolution was not possible. But our case... could have taken no less a sensational course because of its contentious nature.'¹ At contention in the case was something totally new. 'It appears to be,' wrote the presiding judge, Justice Ormrod, in his summation, 'the first occasion on which a court in England has been called on to decide the sex of an individual.'² The individual in question was April Ashley, international supermodel, *Vogue* cover girl and, as it happened, 'the world's most famous transsexual, to date.'³ Her involvement alone would have piqued media interest, but the fact that Arthur Corbett was a member of the British peerage turned this into a feeding frenzy. Hundreds of column inches, tabloid and broadsheet, would be dedicated to the case.

Nevertheless, little if any attention has been paid to the *Corbett v Corbett* decision by historians. It is absent from major surveys both of sex and of the upper class, such as Lesley Hall's *Sex, Gender, and Social Change in Britain Since 1880* (2000), and David Cannadine's *The Decline and Fall of the British Aristocracy* (1990).⁴ One of the few academics who has explored

¹ April Ashley with Duncan Fallowell, *April Ashley's Odyssey* (London, 1982), p.207.

² *Corbett v. Corbett, (otherwise Ashley)*, 2 February 1971, para.46. All references to this case are taken from www.pfc.org.uk/legal/c-v-v.htm (viewed 14 November 2002).

³ Paul Hewitt with Jane Warren, *A Self-Made Man: the Diary of a Man Born in a Woman's Body* (London, 1995) p.22.

⁴ Lesley Hall, *Sex, Gender and Social Change in Britain Since 1880* (Basingstoke, 2000); David Cannadine, *The Decline and Fall of the British Aristocracy* (New Haven, CT., 1990).

the meanings of the case is Toril Moi in *What is a Woman?* (1999). The key issue, she writes, is that 'Judge Ormrod stresses over and over again that he is only concerned with determining the sex of April Ashley for the purpose of marriage.'⁵ Ormrod himself firmly stated that 'I am not concerned to determine the "legal sex" of the respondent (Ashley) at large.'⁶ Moi suggests that:

Judge Ormrod, in my view, is clearly right to frame his decision in this narrow way. By asking "what is April Ashley's sex for the purpose of marriage?" he helps us to see that the ideological difficulties arising from his decision have little to do with the way he thinks about sex, and rather more to do with the way he thinks about marriage.⁷

The problem, which Moi fails to see, is that the way Ormrod thought about marriage was indistinguishable from the ways he thought about sex. As we shall see, the same signifiers of sexuality, physiology and intercourse that were involved in the transsexual autobiographies of the last two chapters were precisely what informed his 'narrow' judgement. *Corbett v. Corbett*, I shall argue in this chapter, had far broader implications than defining sex for the purpose of marriage. Ormrod's final judgement was succinct: 'Wife a Man'. It is in his approach to this conclusion, and in Ashley's and the press's responses to it, that we are able to discern a seemingly continual competition between ways of signifying sex in postwar England. On the one hand there is a commitment to unchanging biological signifiers, whilst on the other there is a belief in more mutable, psychological sex signs. The divergence is apparent in the contrast between Ormrod's notion of marriage and Ashley's. He simply insists that it is 'a relationship which depends upon sex, not gender.'⁸ She disagreed passionately, arguing in *Odyssey* that:

Marriage is not a biological relationship. The biological relationship is called coitus. Marriage is a cultural institution developed from this and

⁵ Toril Moi, *What is a Woman? And Other Essays* (Oxford, 1999), p.97.

⁶ *Corbett v. Corbett*, para. 47.

⁷ Moi, *What is a Woman?* p.98.

⁸ *Corbett v. Corbett*, para. 48.

when a relationship develops it changes its character. I do not see that it makes sense to treat marriage as something entirely separate from the currents of social life.⁹

In *Modern Love*, Marcus Collins argues that the notion of the mutually-fulfilling marriage 'reached its zenith in the quarter century after the Second World War.'¹⁰ That brings us up to 1970, the date of the judgement in *Corbett v Corbett*. The trial did not necessarily mark the collapse of mutuality as a romantic ideal, but it helped demonstrate some of the inconsistencies that had sustained it. Mutuality depended, *prima facie*, upon a man and a woman. Up until the trial, few had thought to question what those two categories might actually mean. 'Man' and 'woman' had been naturalised to the point of being what Judith Butler calls 'pre-discursive'¹¹. *Corbett v Corbett* showed them to be fictions. In her appeal to social and cultural factors, Ashley was clearly attempting to deputise gender as the most important signifier of 'woman', whilst Ormrod explicitly considered sex, that is biological signs, to be paramount. This sex-gender / biology-psychology divide, and its widespread manifestation in reactions to *Corbett v. Corbett*, is what makes April Ashley's divorce trial about far more than just 'what it might mean to be married in contemporary (English) society'.¹² Rather it is a direct exposure of the apparent impossibility of finalising a universalised definition of sex.

The first section of this chapter explores the background to the trial, looking at April Ashley's celebrity status and the way in which she manipulated it to transform her 'outing' as a transsexual into fairytale news coverage of her engagement to Arthur Corbett. This section also narrates how Ashley and Corbett met, and how their marriage quickly hit the rocks. The second section examines the divorce trial itself. It focuses on three particular areas: a) the 'four criteria'

⁹ Ashley, *Odyssey*, p.229.

¹⁰ Marcus Collins, *Modern Love: An Intimate History of Men and Women in Twentieth Century Britain* (London, 2004), p.167. See also: Stephanie Coontz, *Marriage, a History: From Obedience to Intimacy, or, How Love Conquered Marriage* (New York, 2005), p.247.

¹¹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Reprint, with intro. by Judith Butler, New York, 1999, orig. 1989), p.11.

¹² Moi, *What is a Woman?* p.99.

which the medical experts in the trial advised could be used to define sex, b) the dismissal of 'psychological' criteria in favour of 'biological' criteria by Ormrod, and c) Ormrod's insistence on defining 'sex for the purpose of marriage' and no further. The third, and final, section of the chapter illustrates the ways in which the British media responded to Ormrod's judgement. Here we are able to see a reaction against the biological sex signs at play in the courtroom, and a resurgence of the psychological, socially-gendered sex signs which Ashley, as a transsexual, had always relied upon. In the end, what I aim to have demonstrated is a stark division in contemporary discourses on sexual definitions; between the professional medical insistence on apparently immutable biological sex signs on the one hand, and the popular socio-cultural interest in psychology and gender roles on the other.

A Sort of Fairytale

I have already alluded in previous chapters to April Ashley's 'jet-set lifestyle' and indeed throughout the late 1950s and early 1960s she lived a charmed existence of glittering parties, holidays, and modeling work all around Europe. It was at a particularly lavish ball in London, 1959, that she first met Arthur Corbett, the handsome heir to the Rowallen family peerage. His father, Lord Rowallen, had held several elevated positions within the British imperial establishment, including the post of Chief Scout, and a stint as Governor of Tasmania. From the very beginning of their relationship, Corbett knew about Ashley's transsexual past, which at that point only a few other of her friends did. Far from this troubling him, he finessed a divorce from his first wife so that he could move Ashley into his villa in Marbella, Spain and eventually marry her. It seemed that April Ashley, formerly George Jamieson, born of the Liverpool dockland slums, had very much made it. She had everything that a young woman at the cusp of the 1960s might want; a glamorous job that took her all over the world, and a wealthy husband who one day was going to make her Lady Rowallen. But then Roy East, of the *People* came knocking at her London *pied-a-terre* in 1961. Ashley recalls the incident thus:

A man knocked at the apartment door. "My name's Roy East" he shouted from the landing. "And so?" "I'm a reporter from the *People* newspaper." Silence. "Is it true you used to be a boy?" My stomach hit the floor, blood flew to my head, my ears stung and my mouth dried up. I sat down and tried to work out what to do next. Taking a very long breath and moistening my lips with an adjacent Tio Peppe *frappe*, I yelled, "Go to hell!" "We know all about you." Silence. "We're going to publish the story anyway." "I'll call the police!" "Open up and make sure we get it right." "Whichever way you do it, you'll ruin me."¹³

It must have seemed to Ashley that everything would be taken away from her. There had not been a major transsexual exposé in the British press since Roberta Cowell in 1954, and on that occasion it had been Cowell herself who had brought the matter to the world's attention.¹⁴ She had not, unlike Ashley, attempted to hide her past. Nor had she, unlike Ashley, made a career out of being a woman, and a supermodel at that. There was considerable uncertainty as to how the British public, and her various employers, would react when they discovered the truth. As the headline eventually ran, "Her Secret Is Out!" (Fig. 1)¹⁵ Readers of the *Sunday People* on 19 September 1961, heard all about the 'extraordinary case of top model April Ashley.' East had tracked her down to her agency, Fashion Model Ltd., where he was told, "Miss Ashley is very much in demand. If you want to book her for modeling, you must give her as much notice as possible." The agent then went on in a manner which would become common to those non-medical persons called upon to discuss Ashley: litanies of popular female sexual signifiers. "She is a very attractive girl. And she has the figure which makes her very suitable for so many photographic requirements in the fashion industry." The agent then backed up this testimony of

¹³ Ashley, *Odyssey*, p.121.

¹⁴ Stephen Whittle, *The Transgender Debate* (London, 2000), p.57.

¹⁵ Roy East, "HER" SECRET IS OUT', *Sunday People*, 19 September 1961, p.7.

Fig. 2: News of the World, 6 May 1962.

My strange life by April Ashley

From cabin
THEN, some of the most agonising yet joyous moments of my whole strange, whirlwind life. The moment a few hours ago when for the first time more than eight steady years, I reported with a moister.

The mother is a says me with a smile, a little bit of a giggle. The mother, so she is, from what she had delivered at the moment, at this time since her the agony of a great, a moment of a moment.

Scatzen

A lovely girl adds a touch of lipstick—April Ashley in London yesterday

WEREN'T USED TO HIS ITALIAN WAYS

WAFFLE PARIA is a young girl who has been in the news for some time. She is a young girl who has been in the news for some time. She is a young girl who has been in the news for some time.

NEW MAY 6 1962

April Ashley boy to model girl—now she'll wed peer's son

It was a surprise when I was asked to marry a boy. I was a model girl, and he was a peer's son. I was a model girl, and he was a peer's son. I was a model girl, and he was a peer's son.

APRIL AS A BOY
 In the left-hand picture, she is seen with her brother, the boy in the right-hand picture, is her brother.

Ready to go she shows her model girl's pictures etc.

Not always
 new, mother
 but April
 Try to
 remember
 always
 —April

First News

Fig. 3: News of the World, 27 May 1962

Roman scandal —hotel throws us out

SUDDENLY it all seemed easy. I would live my life as a woman. I had made up my mind I could no longer take the fright world in which I was existing.

A few weeks before, I had gone from my job in dress to the "stair boy" job at the Ritz Hotel in Paris. I had thought every man was a potential lover.

My boss was approaching me romantically and the European and "stair boy" community in Paris had been so kind to begin contact. I would be happy to be a "stair boy" in the hotel.

NIGHT CLUB
Boy on the stairs
 I was on the stairs of the Ritz Hotel in Paris. I had a job as a "stair boy" and was in contact with the "stair boys" of the hotel.

AT THE LAROUSSE
 I was on the stairs of the Ritz Hotel in Paris. I had a job as a "stair boy" and was in contact with the "stair boys" of the hotel.

STRIPTease
 I was on the stairs of the Ritz Hotel in Paris. I had a job as a "stair boy" and was in contact with the "stair boys" of the hotel.

GOLD GIFT
 I was on the stairs of the Ritz Hotel in Paris. I had a job as a "stair boy" and was in contact with the "stair boys" of the hotel.

MODEL
 I was on the stairs of the Ritz Hotel in Paris. I had a job as a "stair boy" and was in contact with the "stair boys" of the hotel.

APRIL AT HER LONDON PLAY
 I was on the stairs of the Ritz Hotel in Paris. I had a job as a "stair boy" and was in contact with the "stair boys" of the hotel.

MY STRANGE LIFE by Ashley

... continuing the exciting story of the cabin boy who changed into a beautiful girl.



Fig. 4: News of the World, 6 June 1962

THE



A boy who will one day be a star player in the young men's football team. His name is... Now it is April Ashley.

OPERATION

Now I was facing the irrevocable step the prospect was almost more than my mind could stand

MY STRANGE LIFE

by April Ashley

... who this week bares her innermost thoughts and emotions as a surgeon's skill makes complete her change from man into woman

AS the jet engines of the Caravelle airliner thundered into life I shut my eyes tight. A cold sweat dampened my forehead. My heart began to pound violently.

For this was a flight into terror and abject loneliness; away from all I had ever known as a man into a new, unknown world as a woman.

I was going from Paris to a clinic in Casablanca where a brilliant French-Moroccan surgeon was awaiting to perform on me an intricate operation that would remove the last traces of my manhood.

It was something for which I had been longing through years of my strange, painful life as a man whose body had gradually, steadily been becoming more and more womanly.

But now that I was facing the irrevocable step the prospect was almost more than my mind could stand.

Another moment when the family album: George, aged 6

George in a laboratory

Nothing, except the slight I would have to face, the fact that I was not a man but a woman.

And when he had finished his operation I would be a woman, a woman as you like the word, a woman as possible as I could be.

"All right," he said. "Come into the clinic at once. I will operate at once tomorrow."

That night I moved into a room at the clinic. I was alone, but I was not alone. I had a room-mate, a woman, a woman as you like the word, a woman as possible as I could be.

But now you must prepare yourself for some rough days. I cannot describe the 24 hours that will pass before you can see me from then on, only the relief that will come.

At last they came to give me the operation. I was alone, but I was not alone. I had a room-mate, a woman, a woman as you like the word, a woman as possible as I could be.

For I had a room-mate, a woman, a woman as you like the word, a woman as possible as I could be.

For I had a room-mate, a woman, a woman as you like the word, a woman as possible as I could be.

For I had a room-mate, a woman, a woman as you like the word, a woman as possible as I could be.

For I had a room-mate, a woman, a woman as you like the word, a woman as possible as I could be.

NEWS OF THE WORLD, June 6, 1962 3



April Ashley, now a woman, is seen here in a photograph taken before her operation.

APRIL RELAXES . . . HER HOSPITAL BED IN CASABLANCA NOW ONLY A MEMORY

knowing my secret, all called me "Mademoiselle." Until then I had been known as "April."

But now I suddenly feel alone. The quietness of the hospital bed is a memory.

The quietness of the hospital bed is a memory. The quietness of the hospital bed is a memory.

He made me take all my things and move out. And now I am alone.

He made me take all my things and move out. And now I am alone.

He made me take all my things and move out. And now I am alone.

He made me take all my things and move out. And now I am alone.

He made me take all my things and move out. And now I am alone.



George in a laboratory

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Fig. 5: News of the World, 13 May 1962.



Fig. 8: Sunday Mirror, 8 February 1970

I am not a monster

... I am a
woman

SUNDAY MIRROR FEBRUARY 8 1970 Page 21





APRIL ASHLEY
CONTINUED FROM
PAGE 23

... I am not a monster ...

Body

... I am not a monster ...

Surgeon

... I am not a monster ...

Trapped

... I am not a monster ...

I CAN MAKE LOVE AND ENJOY IT

... I am not a monster ...

Name

... I am not a monster ...

UNISEX CLOTHES WERE MY IDEA

... I am not a monster ...

Shock

... I am not a monster ...




Fig. 9: Sunday Mirror, 8 February 1970



Ashley's undoubted femininity with the appropriate statistics: 'Height 5 ft 9½ in; bust 34'; waist 24'; hips 36: hair brown, eyes brown.'¹⁶

This curvaceous beauty, who appeared in a striking photograph in the article, draped in the very latest women's fashions (including a £2000 mink coat), 'talked quite frankly' about her past. 'Before I was 21,' she told East, "'there was a great change in me. Not so much at that time a physical change, but a very great mental change. All my ideas and thoughts were a woman's. That's why when I reached 21 I decided to live as a woman, dress as a woman, and be known to my friends as a woman... (and) I set my mind on the operation.'¹⁷ East allowed Ashley to recount her history without editorial interruption and, although he asked how much her transsexual surgery cost, he did not press the issue. In fact, for an apparent scandalous exposé, the article was really very supportive. For example, he wondered if Ashley had any regrets about her new life? 'Apparently not. "Look around my flat" she told me. "You'll see it's a (sic) those of a woman. All my emotions are a woman's emotions.' For anyone who wondered just what a 'woman's emotions' were, Ashley filled them in with a recitation of classic female gender roles. 'I even think of getting married, the change in me has been so complete. The only omission in my new life is the fact that I know that I can never have children. But then there are many girls who have been female all their lives who can't have children. I want to do just what they would do. Adopt a couple of kids.'¹⁸

Ashley's undoubtedly female figure, her success as a model and her passionate maternal instincts all featured heavily in East's article, and he referred to her throughout in the feminine 'she' and 'her'. And although the headline did use quotation marks, Ashley's role as a woman never seems to have been in doubt. East did acknowledge the scientific fact that 'no complete man can ever become a complete woman', but this was a concluding tag-on to an article which, more than anything else, celebrated the very public femininity of April Ashley, who 'has had the

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

courage to be frank about her two lives. It is a courage to be admired.¹⁹ All in all, it was hardly the sort of reportage which had led Ashley to fear that it would ruin her. East's repeated references to Ashley's courage and strength of character echo Joanne Meyerowitz's commentary on the case of Christine Jorgensen, which had broken in the United States in the previous decade: 'She had succeeded in making sex change a story of personal triumph as well as a titillating story of sexual transgression.'²⁰ However, this was not how Ashley herself remembered events. Her autobiography, *Odyssey*, directly contradicts not only the positive tone of the *Sunday People* article, but Meyerowitz's agential interpretation of transsexual 'outings' also. Certainly, the idea of 'sex-change' was not entirely new to the British public (the Jorgensen case itself had helped, there) but 'sexual transgression' still had the power to appall. 'The First of January 1960,' warns Lesley Hall, 'did not see the sudden dawning of a new age of sexual freedom in Britain. It would be several years before the "long Victorian" era could be said to have ended.'²¹ Ashley knew the power of these 'Victorian' attitudes well from her days as a model. She recalled, for example, making some of the earliest, 'hopelessly amateurish,' commercials for British television, such as one for Arrid Underarm Spray Deodorant.

The rulebook did not allow one to be filmed in the fully frontal act of spraying one's pits. They shot the underarm, then cut to one's hand going "psh! psh!" with the canister against a black background. Armpit and hand could not figure in the same shot because it was considered obscene... It was a civilisation ago and will give you an idea of the traumas they all underwent when my past hit the headlines.²²

That there should be a gap between East's article and Ashley's autobiographical recollections of it is no surprise. Although it is written partially from her diaries at the time, *Odyssey* was published

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Joanne Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States* (Cambridge, MA., 2002), p.53.

²¹ Lesley Hall, *Sex, Gender and Social Change*, p.167.

²² Ashley, *Odyssey*, p.101.

more than twenty years after her 'outing'. She may perhaps be forgiven for this act of selective remembrance if one considers that, positive article aside, she did then lose all of her modeling contracts. 'You do realise you're finished, darling?' her agent told her.²³ She had, just before the *Sunday People* ran her story, finished filming a movie, but when it was released, 'they had even removed my credit from *The Road to Hong Kong*, the bastards.'²⁴

Faced with the seemingly imminent collapse of her career, Ashley sold her 'exclusive' life story to the *News of the World*, for £10,000; a huge sum at the time. It was the sort of damage-limitation exercise that would become a common, predictable even, celebrity strategy later on in the century. At the time, however, it was remarkable, particularly given that it was in this forum that she released the news of her engagement to Corbett. In 1962, the *News of the World* enjoyed the largest circulation of any newspaper on the planet, with an estimated 6 ½ million copies sold and a readership of close to 13 million. Ashley set about using the serialisation of her past as a way of shoring up belief in her as a 'real' woman, rather than a transsexual or a man. This she did by continued and repeated use of the sorts of social sex signs that the *News of the World's* readers would have recognised: an undeniably female form, a distinctly feminine mind-set, and an unquestionably heterosexual lifestyle. 'It was the classic, six-part sensationalisation of a short ragged life,' she recalled. 'My aristocratic associations gave it piquancy. England was unbelievably ho-ho in those days and I was often pilloried for having the nerve to make friendships among the upper classes. The series, via sex and drugs and violence, ended with a reference to my liaison with Arthur.'²⁵ In fact, England was so 'ho-ho' in those days that her liaison with Arthur was actually one of the first things the serialisation mentioned – on the front page of the *News of the World*, 6 May 1962. Under the banner headline 'MY STRANGE LIFE – By April Ashley' came the subtitle, 'IN LOVE' which presaged the following details about the woman who had once been George Jamieson, deckhand on a Merchant Navy ship (Fig.2):

²³ Ibid., p.122.

²⁴ Ibid. *The Road to Hong Kong* (1962, dir. Norman Panama) was the last of the Bing Crosby and Bob Hope road movies, starring them as the con-men Babcock and Turner. Liz Taylor co-starred. Ashley is listed on the movie's credit at the Internet Movie Database, but she is listed as 'uncredited'. See: <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0039018/> (viewed 23 July, 2005).

²⁵ Ashley, *Odyssey*, p.137.

Finally, by a fantastic operation, he emerged as April, a woman beautiful by any standards, beautiful enough to become a top model. A week ago it was announced that April was going to marry Mr. Arthur Corbett, son and heir of Lord Rowallen, the former Chief Scout and now Governor-General of Tasmania.²⁶

Just as it had been for the *Sunday People*, it was Ashley's beauty as much as her surgery which vouched for her status as a woman. Her position as a young woman happily engaged – to a to-be Lord, no-less! – also reinforced her gender qualifications. Those extraordinary aristocratic connections would come back to haunt Ashley, but for the *News of the World* they added more than piquancy. They were an opportunity for some touching family scenes. It was arranged for April's mother, Ada Jamieson, to be introduced by telephone to Corbett, for the benefit of the article. "Hallo, Arthur," she said timidly, "I'm so looking forward to seeing you." "So am I," said Arthur, "I'm desperately anxious to meet all April's relatives. She's a wonderful person and I'm very much in love with her."²⁷ After the good news of her society marriage announcement, *The News of the World* invited readers to turn the page 'for her own story of her amazing journey from unhappy boy to beautiful, successful woman.'²⁸ Social normativity as a woman, Collins notes, was tied to marriage: By the time Ashley announced her engagement, being a wife was all-but a universal state for British women, with ninety-six percent of them married by the age of forty-five.²⁹ Her aim was what Stephanie Coontz suggests was the 'master event' of most people's lives at the time: a wedding, followed by 'happy ever after'.³⁰ Ashley was positioning herself as just another girl getting ready to tie the knot – albeit to an aristocrat.

²⁶ 'MY STRANGE LIFE – by April Ashley', *News of the World*, 6 May 1962, p.1.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Collins, *Modern Love*, p.168. On Fairy Tale marriages during the period, see: Elinor Harper, 'Heroes, Princesses and Wicked Wives: The Fairy Tale Lives of Modern Men', Unpublished PhD, University of Warwick (2004).

³⁰ Coontz, *Marriage, a History*, pp.247, 20-23.

Few girls, however, would have been able to match the story Ashley told. The six articles were no less sensational than she remembered them in *Odyssey*. The headline to the 20 May piece, for example, read, 'ROMAN SCANDAL', wherein she detailed 'drugs, orgies, grotesque parties' in the Italian capital (Fig. 3).³¹ Throughout the month and a half that the articles ran, it was Ashley herself who served as the credited writer (although in *Odyssey* she says that a journalist, Noyes Thomas, wrote the pieces) and none of the details or explanations of her transsexuality are at any glaring variance with her autobiography. Indeed, throughout, the first-person narrative, there is nothing that contradicts Ashley's key statement that 'I really was a woman', (Fig. 4).³² The accompanying photographs (not chosen by Ashley) are all extremely flattering, such as the 6 May (Fig. 2) picture of her decked out in a smart skirt and blouse with a fashionably wide-brimmed hat, captioned, 'Ready to go shopping – April shows her model girl's flair.'³³ Accompanying this was a shot of Ashley applying her make-up; her eyebrows plucked and her lashes heavily kohled – an echo of the look Elizabeth Taylor had made fashionable in the previous year's movie *Cleopatra*. The caption here read; 'A lovely girl adds a touch of lipstick.'³⁴ Both photographs imbued Ashley with the significant power of a common language of female gender roles – shopping, fashion, make-up, being attractive – which were repeated over the six week serial: April in a baby-doll nightdress (13 May: 'prepares for some beauty sleep' – Fig. 5), April in a fashionable fur stole (13 May: 'with her fiancé' – Fig. 5), April in stilettos and stockings (20 May); April, in full make-up, with her hair tied up in a bow taking a bath (20 May, 'April in the foam... a bubble bath for beauty'), April, once more sporting the *Cleopatra* look and showing plenty of cleavage (27 May) and April, finally, in a frilly dress chatting on the telephone (6 May, Fig. 4). The photographs, as much as the text itself, continually reinforced Ashley's position as a woman, and an extremely fashionable and attractive one at that. Chromosomes, genes, defects of birth and other such scientific considerations that would later mean so much, seemed to carry little weight with the British tabloid-reading public when it came to deciding whether or not someone was a woman. Far more important than the XX or XY arrangement of her genes seems

³¹ 'Roman Scandal – hotel throws us out', *News of the World*, 27 May 1962, p.2.

³² 'THE OPERATION', *News of the World*, 3 June 1962, p.3.

³³ 'My Strange Life by April Ashley', *News of the World*, 6 May 1962, p.3.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p.2.

to have been whether or not Ashley could carry off a silk gown with a mink shawl, which she could, 'flawlessly.'³⁵ As long as April Ashley lived up to contemporary gender-role standards she would clearly pass as woman. In managing to reference the glamour of Elizabeth Taylor, a iconic figure of womanhood, in her makeup and appearance, whilst simultaneously laying claim to the more domestic longings for husband and children, Ashley had every feminine base covered. Happy and heterosexual, she was engaged to be married, as was expected of all young women; young women, who, on seeing Ashley's fashion-shoot photographs, would recognise her as an aspirational figure. So perhaps her secret was out, but this time, with these impressive signifying weapons on her side, she decided that 'I wouldn't run away. I wouldn't try to hide anymore.'³⁶ And so she lived openly as a woman who, as far as the British public knew, was not only a pretty paragon of feminine virtues, was happily married, too. What more could any girl in the early 1960s possibly want? As it turned out, what she actually wanted was a villa and a divorce – for whilst the *News of the World* story stopped on 3 June, Ashley's had barely begun.

What had seemed like some sort of fairytale in *The News of the World* had actually degenerated into a nightmare for Ashley. Gore Vidal's infamous transsexual homicide novel, *Myra Breckinridge*, was published at the same time as Ashley's case came to court.³⁷ The reality of Ashley's life back at Corbett's villa in Marbella made Vidal's tale of a MTF transsexual who changes sex, kills a man, and then changes sex back to avoid the police, seem positively tame. Corbett, as I said, knew about Ashley's past, but she too knew his secrets. He was a cross-dresser and, in addition to his transvestism he had frequently been a visitor to male brothels. Reading *Corbett v. Corbett* and *Odyssey* it becomes apparent that Corbett thought that being with Ashley, who had *really* changed sex, he could perhaps suppress his own homosexual urges.³⁸ Much later, in an ITV documentary about the Corbett family's place in twentieth-century British history, Ashley would make this strange arrangement much clearer:

³⁵ 'There, in a crowded pub, Arthur told me he loved me', *News of the World*, 10 June 1962, p.3.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p.4.

³⁷ Gore Vidal, *Myra Breckinridge* (London, 1968).

³⁸ Ashley, *Odyssey*, pp.115-118, 123, 125; *Corbett v. Corbett*, para.38.

He was two people. A man and a woman. I used to call the woman *She*. The legs would be crossed in a very exaggerated way, the way he held his cigarette would change, the voice would become slightly higher pitched... She was a very nasty woman and would call me a prostitute. I would say "Arthur, look, if it would ease the pressure between us and it would stop you behaving in this appalling way, why don't you put on a dress and get it over and done with?" He wouldn't go to bed with me by the way.³⁹

The couple's sex life was correspondingly unsatisfactory, undermining the 'mutuality' ideal on which she had 'sold' the marriage to the *News of the World* and which still dominated British ways of thinking about marriage.⁴⁰ Despite the fact that they had married in the winter of 1962 in Gibraltar (whose dominion status alone made the contract legally suspect), they barely ever seem to have had sex. He said in court that she had refused him sex for more than a year because she had 'complained of vaginal abscesses', whilst she insisted that she had allowed him to penetrate her, but that each time he had tried, he withdrew, weeping, 'I can't, I can't.'⁴¹ Before long they had moved into separate rooms at the villa and Ashley embarked on a long string of sexual encounters with other men.⁴² Eventually she moved back to Britain in 1964, where she attempted to resurrect her acting and dancing career. It was there, two years later, in her north London flat, that she received materials from Corbett's solicitor, informing her that he was seeking an annulment of the marriage on the grounds that 'April Ashley... at the time of the ceremony was a person of the male sex.'⁴³

³⁹ April Ashley, speaking in *Time of Our Lives*, ITV, 26 March 2002, cited in Jessica Berens, 'Altered Ego', *The Observer*, 25 March 2002, p.14.

⁴⁰ Collins, *Modern Love*, p.167.

⁴¹ *Corbett v. Corbett*, para.38.

⁴² Ashley, *Odyssey*, pp.126-135.

⁴³ *Corbett v. Corbett*, para.39. The impetus behind this seems not simply to have been the sexual and emotional break up of the relationship, but also the influence of Lord Rowallen, a strict Scottish Presbyterian Christian, who threatened Corbett with disinheritance unless he at least divorced his scandalous bride.

The Four Criteria

In the trial that ensued, April Ashley's mastery of the feminine gender role would count for little in the signification of womanhood. What would matter, as the presiding judge, Justice Ormrod, made clear, was medical science. 'The quality of the medical evidence on both sides was quite astounding,' he wrote, 'and I wish to express to all the distinguished doctors concerned in this case my gratitude... The cause of justice is deeply indebted to them.'⁴⁴ For most of the trial it was the doctors who took centre stage, rather than Ashley and Corbett. Fashion, beauty, and the maternal instinct (all of which had served her so well in her encounters with the public and the press in 1962), were swept aside in favour of a purely biological strategy for deciding whether or not someone was a woman. Ormrod's application of this strategy to his judgement in *Corbett v. Corbett*, however, would rely entirely upon social conventions surrounding heterosexuality, marriage and the nature of gender roles. April Ashley, he decided, was not playing her role as a woman naturally. Despite what the *News of the World* had presented as a fairy-tale wedding between a model and an aristocrat, the marriage was a sham: 'Wife a Man.'⁴⁵

The first medical evidence presented at the trial was not from medical witnesses called by either Corbett or Ashley. Miss Josephine Barnes and Mr Leslie Williams, both members of the Royal College of Surgeons and the Royal College of Gynecologists, were the appointed court medical inspectors and had been called upon to 'examine the sexual organs of April Corbett,' which they did on the 22 May 1968. Their report reads both as detached and disgusted:

We find that the breasts are well-developed though the nipples are of masculine type. The voice is rather low pitched. There are almost no penile remains and there is a normally placed urethral orifice. The vagina is of ample size to admit a normal and erect penis. The walls are skin covered and moist. There is no impediment on "her part" to sexual intercourse. Rectal examination does not reveal any uterus or

⁴⁴ Ibid., para.34.

⁴⁵ Ibid., para.3.

ovaries or testicles. There is no scar on the thigh indicating where a skin graft might have been taken... We also strongly suggest that an investigation into "her" chromosomal sex be carried out by some expert.⁴⁶

The language is properly scientific, but the repeated use of inverted commas when referring to 'her' indicates some hostility on the part of Barnes and Williams. Not even Justice Ormrod, whose written judgement revealed him to be anything but sympathetic towards Ashley, refused to refer to her in the feminine. It is clear that Barnes and Williams did not consider Ashley to be a woman, but they had difficulty proving this with the evidence they, as surgeons, were able to place before the court. She had visible breasts, a functional vagina and no evidence remained to suggest she had once had male sexual organs. A 'rather' low pitched voice and nipples of the masculine type struggled to outweigh her ability to be penetrated by a normal erect penis in terms of what surgically signified 'woman.'⁴⁷ The surgeons' recourse to advising a chromosomal analysis of Ashley's sex was an admission of defeat. Unable to deny her femininity in terms of outward appearance and heterosexual functionality, all of which they knew could be convincingly altered by members of their own profession, they tried to point the court in the direction of sex signs which could not be changed. This tension, between the popular, social signs of womanhood (having breasts, being able to be penetrated by a 'normal' heterosexual man) and more 'scientific' sex signs (chromosomes), would come to dominate the entire trial.

Excluding Barnes and Williams, a total of six expert medical witnesses would be called to testify during the case – three apiece for both Corbett and Ashley. Appearing for Corbett was Professor C.J. Dewhurst, F.R.C.S.E., F.R.C.O.G., Professor of Obstetrics and Gynaecology at Queen Charlotte's hospital in London, who had that year collaborated on a book called *The*

⁴⁶ 'Supplementary Report of Mr Leslie Williams, F.R.C.S, F.R.C.O.G. & Miss Josephine Barnes, D.M., F.R.C.S., F.R.C.O.G.', cited in *Ibid.*, para.35.

⁴⁷ The surgical description of masculine-type nipples is in contradiction to Ashley's own description of them as 'pink, the palest.' Ashley, *Odyssey*, p.1.

Intersexual Disorders.⁴⁸ Dewhurst was also working with another of Corbett's witnesses, Dr. J.B. Randall, M.D., F.R.C.P., D.P.M., consultant psychiatrist at Charing Cross hospital, on a study of transsexual treatments.⁴⁹ Joining them in testifying for Corbett was Professor Dent, M.D., F.R.S., F.R.C.P., Professor of Human Metabolism at University College Hospital, London. Ashley's experts were of an equally high pedigree. Dr. C.N. Armstrong, M.D., F.R.C.P., consultant physician at Newcastle Royal Infirmary, had written several papers on sex and gender and was the co-editor of 'a well-known book,' *Intersexuality in Vertebrates including Man* (1964).⁵⁰ Professor Ivor Mills, F.R.C.P., Professor of Medicine at Cambridge University was 'particularly interested in endocrinology as applied to cases showing various kinds of sex anomalies.'⁵¹ Professor Roth, a Psychiatrist at the University of Newcastle-Upon Tyne, was said by Ormrod to have 'considerable experience of the psychological aspects of such cases.'⁵² From the very start of their various testimony, the six medical experts agreed that 'anomalies of sex may be divided into two broad divisions.'⁵³ These were 'those cases which are primarily psychological in character' and those in which there are 'abnormalities in the anatomy of the reproductive system (including the external genitalia).'⁵⁴ This mirrored the tension between social and biological sex signs in the Barnes and Williams report, and it was precisely the sex/gender tension that is vital to the comprehension of transsexuality.

The six witnesses further elaborated on such cases of anomalous sex by agreeing that 'there are, at least, four criteria for assessing the sexual condition of an individual.' These criteria were:

⁴⁸ *Corbett v. Corbett* para.40; Christopher J. Dewhurst & Ronald R Gordon, *The Intersexual Disorders* (London, 1969).

⁴⁹ It is ironic, considering the nature of the evidence they gave against Ashley, that their collaboration would eventually grow into the Charing Cross Gender Clinic, which became Britain's foremost institution for transsexual operations and therapies.

⁵⁰ Charles N. Armstrong & Alan J. Marshall (eds), *Intersexuality in Vertebrates Including Man* (London & New York, NY., 1964).

⁵¹ *Corbett v. Corbett*, para. 40.

⁵² *Ibid.*, para.41

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

- (i) Chromosomal factors
- (ii) Gonadal factors (ie presence or absence of testes or ovaries)
- (iii) Genital factors (including internal sex organs)
- (iv) Psychological factors⁵⁵

The four criteria fit once again into the divisions between the biological and the social. Chromosomes, gonads and genitals are of the body, whilst what were referred to as 'psychological factors' describe the way in which an individual gendered themselves within the social setting. As the trial went on, Corbett's team would argue in favour of the first three criteria, whilst Ashley's would look to the fourth. But no matter how much faith Justice Ormrod placed in the medical evidence, he had no intention of allowing science to drive the legal proceedings completely. 'These criteria,' he wrote in his judgement, 'are, of course, relevant to, but do not necessarily decide, the legal basis of sex determination.'⁵⁶ There were other, considerably less scientific factors at play, also.

Mills, the Cambridge endocrinologist, said to Ashley at one stage, 'There's a great deal of snobbery in this case, April.'⁵⁷ The allegation is unsurprising, I think, for 'this case' directly involved the inheritance rights of a member of the aristocracy. Ashley recalls feeling this quite keenly, seeing it not merely as 'the obvious prejudices against transsexuals and the usual gestures of male chauvinism', but a manifestation of distaste at her humble origins:

A more subtle association between Arthur, Arthur's counsel and the bench, the subconscious *hauteur* of educated gentlemen who had no intention of being made to revise or examine their notions of what a man, a woman, a marriage might be, especially not at the behest of a parvenu such as myself, who, having been born in a Liverpool slum,

⁵⁵ Ibid., para.43

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ashley, *Odyssey*, p.216.

not only refused to stay there, but had the damn nerve to change her sex into the bargain, and not only that, but much more, cheek of all cheek, had the impertinence to marry into the peerage as well!⁵⁸

It is not entirely impossible to see 'wife a man' as a reaction to Ashley's impertinence. As Arthur Marwick notes, the social realities of post-war Britain may 'not be *explained* solely by reference to class, but they certainly cannot be fully *understood* without reference to class.'⁵⁹ The judgement in *Corbett v. Corbett* cannot be understood without some acknowledgement of the Cinderella elements of Ashley's fairytale marriage; the girl (boy) from the working-class slums magically marrying the handsome prince (lord), much to the chagrin of his associates. But unlike other sexually scandalised trials of the time (such as the *Lady Chatterley's Lover* trial, during which the prosecution counsel demanded of the jury, 'Is it a book you would even wish for your wife or servants to read?'), there is no sudden declaration of class interests in *Corbett v. Corbett*.⁶⁰ In fact, so apparently classless is the judgement and the case itself that, despite the presence of a very much 'fallen' aristocrat at a time when the institution of aristocracy itself seemed under siege, there is no explicit mention of 'class' in any of the media coverage of the trial. Nevertheless, the mechanics of class do flow through the case, specifically when it comes to questions of heritage. The key moment was Ormrod's decision to limit discussion of Ashley's sex to her 'original biological classification.'⁶¹ Without intending any pun, it is *classification* that gives us our clue, for here is expressed the desire to maintain social distinctions from birth. By insisting that 'the respondent's operation... cannot alter her true sex', Ormrod echoes what Ashley felt to be the disquiet at her having 'altered' her true class status. This insistence proved to be the major stumbling block for Ashley's case. It meant that all Corbett's counsel need do was to prove that she had been born male, and male she would remain. Sex becomes rigid hierarchical class in *Corbett v Corbett*, something one was born to, rather than became for oneself. The snobbery that

⁵⁸ Ibid., p.216.

⁵⁹ Arthur Marwick, *British Society Since 1945* (London, 2003), p.26.

⁶⁰ Cited in Tom Hickman, *The Sexual Century* (London, 1999), p.154.

⁶¹ Ashley, *Odyssey*, p.216.

Mills and Ashley perceived to be aimed at her social origins actually manifested itself in a snobbery towards her sexual heritage and her attempts to disavow it.

Ormrod's decision to fix sex at birth fit into contemporary medical practice, but it also effectively neutralised the fourth criteria, psychological factors, as valid sex signs. However, the narrative mechanics of Corbett's petition for annulment, that he had married a man, called for some explanation of Ashley's condition. What, in effect, had happened to her that she had married another man? It is in the medical explanations of Ashley's condition that the sexual snobbery of 'original biological classifications' was most fully developed. The court heard an abbreviated version of Ashley's life story, which mostly tallied with her own accounts years before in *The News of the World*, and later in *Odyssey*. Her past (particularly her stint as a drag queen and her eventual vaginoplasty and hormonal therapies) led Ormrod to dwell momentarily upon 'two kinds of psychological abnormality' in sex: transvestism and transsexuality. He gave the classic description of transsexuality, which closely followed the diagnosis set down in Harry Benjamin's *The Transsexual Phenomenon* (1966). Ormrod noted that the 'extremely powerful urge to become a member of the opposite sex' (which distinguished transsexuality from transvestism) could often lead to 'extreme anxiety and obsessional states.' Transsexuals, he added, 'do not appear to respond favourably to any known form of psychological treatment and, consequently, some serious-minded and responsible doctors are inclining to the view that such operations may provide the only way of relieving the psychological distress.'⁶² It is interesting to note that even in 1970, when transsexuality had been part of the public discourse for well over a decade, it was still referred to with surprise: 'serious-minded and responsible' doctors were involved, not just shady foreigners like Dr. Burou in Casablanca, who had operated on Ashley. Ormrod's explanation of the reason that such upstanding professionals would recommend surgery further confirmed his assertion that the operations could not alter birth sex. 'The purpose of the these operations, of course, is to help relieve the patient's symptoms and to assist in the

⁶² Ibid., para.41

management of their disorder; it is not to change the patient's sex.⁶³ Having established these two 'sexual anomalies', Ormrod (himself a qualified physician) called upon the medical experts to opine as to which category Ashley belonged, to *classify* her as one oddity or another.

'It is clear from the account which I have given of (Ashley's) history that it accords very closely with (the) description of a male transsexual,' said the judge, adding that Dr Randall (one of Corbett's witnesses) considered that Ashley should be 'properly classified as a male homosexual transsexualist'. The 'queering' of April Ashley continued with Professor Dewhurst agreeing with Randall's diagnosis and reaffirming the notion that surgical operations did nothing to change the patient's sex. He thought that the description 'castrated male' would be correct.⁶⁴ This cruel (and not even accurate, as it ignored the ensuing creation of a vagina, which even Ormrod conceded) classification seems to be yet another example of what Ashley called 'the all-purpose stigma of indecency' with which Corbett's counsel tried to paint her.⁶⁵ What chance, she asked, did what they saw as a gay eunuch stand against the repentant heir to an English peerage? In some ways, Corbett's team's 'queering' strategy chimes with what Alan Sinfield suggests was homosexuality's 'most profound threat' to the 'leisured world' of which Corbett was a part: 'its tendency to disrupt class distinctions.'⁶⁶ By painting Ashley not as a woman but as a homosexual, they succeeded perhaps in classifying her also as a threat to the social structure which had made Corbett heir to a peerage. Here was Ashley, a working-class boy in reality, degrading an aristocrat into a seedy world of gay sexual acts. The social mobility of the Ashley-Corbett relationship was constructed as ill in either direction: she was not permitted to move upwards and he had to be protected from 'falling' down. Justice Ormrod was not immune to the strategy, which involved Corbett himself openly admitting to his failings and expressing a desire to live a decent life once more. 'He described his sexual experience in considerable detail and without any apparent embarrassment. He was, in fact, an unusually good witness.'⁶⁷ His

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ashley, *Odyssey*, p.215.

⁶⁶ Alan Sinfield, *Literature, Politics and Culture in Postwar Britain* (2nd edn., London, 2004), p.78.

⁶⁷ *Corbett v. Corbett*, para.36.

openness and apparent honesty, his *nobility* in short, contrasted with Ashley's frequently intemperate court appearances. It all looked like a matter of breeding.

Her own medical experts were not of much help here, in so far that their pronouncements on her 'sexual abnormality', whilst properly nuanced for scientific discussion, hardly made the situation as clear, from a legal and social standpoint as 'castrated male' did. Professor Roth both admitted to serious doubts about the efficacy of transsexual surgeries *and* heartily endorsed Ashley's classification as a 'case of transsexualism.' It is apparent that Ashley's counsel, J.P. Cormyn Q.C., believed that if Roth testified to believing true cases of transsexuality to be very rare, it would make his assertion that Ashley was one of these unusual cases seem more plausible. He would present as a serious-minded doctor, not some scalpel-happy butcher. Roth's evidence though, became subtler still. In agreement with Dr. Armstrong, he said was prepared to regard the case as one of 'inter-sex,' which was their way of giving some 'physical contributory factors' to their arguments. They stated that some bodily abnormalities had triggered the 'psychological aspects' of transsexuality in Ashley and had caused her to live as a woman. Armstrong suggested that this meant Ashley should be 'assigned' to the female sex. Dewhurst concurred with this further complication of their classification, saying that he thought that Ashley should be 'regarded as a woman socially.'⁶⁸ Thus Ashley's case lacked any specific guiding argument. Her counsel and medical witnesses had effectively classified her three different ways: a transsexual, an intersexual, and a woman for social purposes. Corbett's counsel, on the other hand, had labeled her a homosexual eunuch and left it at that. When he came to decide upon Ashley's sexual anomaly, Justice Ormrod called her a 'male transsexual' and noted that 'I do not think the facts of this case, when critically examined, support the assumptions which Professor Roth had been asked to make as the basis for his evidence.'⁶⁹ Ashley noted of her counsel's approach to the case; 'I think he underestimated the complexity of the argument that would have to be mounted in my defence and the force with which it would have to be prosecuted if we were

⁶⁸ Ibid., para.42.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

to succeed.⁷⁰ What actually seems to have happened is that Cormyn underestimated the simplicity of his opponent's argument, and that his own, in contrast, would seem ill-equipped for dealing with so black-and-white a question as sexual difference.

The Manichean nature of the question at hand was thrust to the fore when the case moved on to discuss the three anatomical criteria: chromosomes, genitals and gonads. Introducing the evidence, Justice Ormrod made an odd statement: 'I think that this part of the evidence is of marginal significance only in the present case.'⁷¹ I say 'odd' because he then proceeded to make his entire judgement based on this 'part' of the evidence:

The respondent has been shown to have XY chromosomes and, therefore, to be of male chromosomal sex; to have had testicles prior to the operation and, therefore, to be of male gonadal sex; to have had male external genitalia without any evidence of internal or external female sex organs and, therefore to be of male genital sex; and psychologically a transsexual.⁷²

The first criterion, the chromosomal, could never be changed by any medical technologies and thus obviously signified Ashley as male. Both the second and third criteria, the gonadal and the genital, *could* be changed by surgery, but because Ormrod insisted that the judgement must be about Ashley's classified birth sex, these too, signified her as a man. Ormrod then dismissed the 'social' evidence of Ashley's femininity. This was truly the killer blow to Ashley's case, as Cormyn had hoped that her mere appearance in court, dressed in the very latest fashions, would be enough to convince the judge of her status as a woman. Cormyn, wrote Ashley, 'held too much

⁷⁰ Ashley, *Odyssey*, p.209.

⁷¹ *Corbett v. Corbett*, para.43.

⁷² *Ibid.*, paras.45-46.

faith in putting me in the witness box and letting appearances speak for themselves.⁷³ As the judgement shows, this was a serious misunderstanding of how the trial would proceed:

Socially, by which I mean the manner in which (Ashley) is living in the community, she is living as, and passing as, a woman more or less successfully. Her outward appearance, at first sight, was convincingly feminine, but on closer and longer inspection in the witness box, it was much less so. The voice, manner, gestures and attitude became increasingly reminiscent of the accomplished female impersonator.⁷⁴

Ormrod's distaste for Ashley's accomplished impersonation can, I think, be explained by what Judith Butler calls the 'crucial' distinction between the 'expression and performance' of gender.⁷⁵ In Butler's analysis, gender is exposed as a contingent series of performances which present themselves as the expression of an 'abiding', pre-existing, biologically-determined self. Gender, she writes, is in fact nothing more than 'the stylized repetition of acts', such as, in Ormrod's words, 'voice, manner, gestures and attitudes.'⁷⁶ The social role of the woman, in other words, presents itself as the natural expression of the female body, when it is in fact a 'performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform the mode of belief.'⁷⁷ Ormrod's distaste, his sexual snobbery, is founded in a discomfort caused by the revelation of this performance in Ashley. His insistence upon fixing sexual classification at birth is an attempt on his part to shore up Butler's 'phantasmic effect of abiding identity', of prioritising the biological over the social.

⁷³ Ashley, *Odyssey*, p.209.

⁷⁴ *Corbett v. Corbett*, para.46.

⁷⁵ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p.180.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p.179.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

However, Ormrod's decision to concentrate the case only on 'what is meant by the word "woman" in the context of marriage,' revealed the instability of such prioritisations.⁷⁸ He insisted that he was 'not concerned to determine the "legal sex" of the respondent (Ashley) at large' because that would clearly have involved more weight being given to her ability to pass 'more or less successfully' in public.⁷⁹ To define 'woman' in the context of marriage, Ormrod believed that 'sex is clearly an essential determinant.'⁸⁰ There were other factors to marriage, such as love and companionship, but, he wrote, it was distinguished from all other human relationships by a characteristic that could 'only be met by two persons of the opposite sex': heterosexual intercourse. (Here, the legal position Ormrod outlined was in direct contrast to the ideal of 'mutuality' traced by Marcus Collins, who has suggested that mid-twentieth-century British marriage was characterised by an *equal* balance between companionship and sexual fulfillment.⁸¹) Early on in the case it had been established by the surgeons Barnes and Williams that Ashley had a vagina of sufficient size and depth to be penetrated by a normal erect penis. It was also common ground between the two parties in the case that Ashley had had sexual intercourse with many men, even if not with Corbett. Her ability to have heterosexual intercourse, in other words, was a matter of public record in front of the court; so why did Ormrod ultimately rule against her? Legal scholar Katherine Franke, in one of the few academic discussions of the case, suggests that 'here we witness the power, *sub rosa*, of the cultural, not the physical, genitals as the essence of true sex.'⁸² What was 'secretly' (*sub rosa*) exposed by Ormrod's ruling was that the 'abiding' body, the ability of a vagina to be penetrated, was a cultural value, a performance to be judged. And Ormrod did just that:

⁷⁸ *Corbett v. Corbett*, para.47

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ Collins, *Modern Love*, p.6.

⁸² Katherine M. Franke, 'The Central Mistake of Sex Discrimination Law: The Disaggregation of Sex From Gender', *University of Pennsylvania Law Review*, November (1995), p.22. See also: J. Dewar, 'Transsexualism and Marriage', *Kingston Law Review* 15.1 (1985), pp.58-69; D. Bradley, 'Transsexualism and Legal Policy', *Gender Dysphoria* 1,1 (1991), pp.25-40. Bradley is particularly sympathetic towards Ashley.

Even the most extreme degrees of transsexualism in a male, or the most severe hormonal imbalance which can exist in a person with male chromosomes, male genitalia and male gonads cannot reproduce a person who is naturally capable of performing the essential role of a woman in marriage.⁸³

The keyword was 'naturally'. The 'skillful surgeries', hormone treatments and feminine gender roles, all seemed to Ormrod to be unnatural, in so far as they were deliberately done, *performed*, after the fact of birth, after classification. Ormrod made his feelings clear about this:

I would, if necessary, be prepared to hold that the respondent was physically incapable of consummating a marriage because I do not think that sexual intercourse using the completely artificial cavity constructed by Dr Burou can possibly be described... as "ordinary and complete intercourse"... When such a cavity has been constructed in a male, the difference between sexual intercourse using it, and anal or intracrural intercourse, is, in my judgement, to be measured in centimetres.⁸⁴

'Therefore,' Franke summarises, 'notwithstanding present physical facts to the contrary, once a person has been attributed a sex, it is not available to subsequent alteration.'⁸⁵ Ashley's original classification made her ability to have sex, in Ormrod's eyes, 'unnatural'. Just as Corbett's counsel seem to have hoped, the judge had begun to describe Ashley in homosexual terms, notably the reference to anal intercourse. Any homosexual activity by Ashley with a man – that is, Corbett or anyone else – would by definition make her a man, also. She had been born with a male body, and that, in the eyes of English law, would make her a man for the rest of her life.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid., para.48

⁸⁵ Franke, 'The Central Mistake of Sex Discrimination Law', p.23.

Ormrod duly pronounced the marriage null and void, denying Ashley any legal claim to the Marbella villa that she and Corbett had shared. As they so often had in her life, things were not looking well for April Ashley; she had little money and, with the era of Twiggy upon British fashion, her voluptuous modeling days were mostly over.⁸⁶ With no man, no house, and no job, she did what she did best: went out of the courthouse and performed for her public.

To Love as a Woman

In New York, Harry Benjamin, author of *The Transsexual Phenomenon* (1968), criticised the *Corbett v. Corbett* ruling as 'terribly illogical. It is a very inhuman decision,' and Dr Howard Jones at the Johns Hopkins Gender Clinic in Baltimore was equally scathing. But the response of the British medical profession to the *Corbett v. Corbett* case was somewhat muted.⁸⁷ A lone, anonymous letter to the house journal of the British Medical Association, *The Lancet*, complained that Ormrod's ruling that artificially-created vaginas could not signify 'woman' would create difficulties for intersexed persons.⁸⁸ In response, one of Corbett's medical witnesses, C.J. Dewhurst, fired off a letter supporting the judgement, and the controversy – in the medical realm at least – died away quietly.⁸⁹ It would be in the realm of the popular press that the story would play out.

Although she has since been mostly forgotten by historians, April Ashley at the time attracted considerable attention, filling hundreds of newspaper column inches throughout January and February of 1970. The media clamour though, resists easy contextualisation. The immediate thought is to position Ashley squarely within the 'permissive society', for even if the law refused her a change of legal sex, it had not proscribed transsexual surgical operations. Indeed, soon it

⁸⁶ Marriane Thessander, *The Feminine Ideal* (London, 1997), pp179-200.

⁸⁷ Ashley, *Odyssey*, p.227.

⁸⁸ Anon., 'Sex and Gender', *Lancet* (21 February, 1970), p.450. Ashley claims that the anonymous author was Professor Mills, one of her medical witnesses, *Odyssey*, p.228. Much later, another of Ashley's witnesses, Armstrong, would refer to the case in his valedictory article, claiming that the overriding concern in transsexuality should be psychological sex, which he felt Ormrod foolishly ignored. See: C.N. Armstrong, 'My 70 Years in Medicine in Northumbria', *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine* 32.2 (1989), pp.103-106.

⁸⁹ C.J. Dewhurst, 'Sex and Gender', *Lancet* (7 March, 1970), p.517.

would be providing them free of charge on the NHS. There was also no moral outcry about the existence of April Ashley the transsexual. She did not become the target of a campaign by Mrs Mary Whitehouse, the fate of other publicly visible sexual transgressors. The two most socially conservative of the tabloid newspapers, the *Daily Express* and the *Daily Mail*, reported the trial in the same, reasonably sympathetic, manner as the more liberal *Daily Mirror*. Nevertheless, it is worth asking whether the British public's broad acceptance of April Ashley was actually an act of permissiveness. Collins describes the 'permissive moment' in Britain as 'almost exactly span(ning) the sixties.'⁹⁰ From the Obscene Publications Act in 1959 through to the first Harold Wilson Labour governments, wherein divorce laws were relaxed, homosexuality was decriminalised, and abortion was legalised, these totemic changes represented genuine splits with the past.⁹¹ It is possible to argue that the seeming acceptance of transsexuality does not properly belong in this tradition.⁹² Throughout her encounters with the media and with the law, Ashley only ever claimed to want to get married and have children. The view of herself that she presented to the British public was one of a pretty, well-dressed woman who fulfilled the gender stereotypes of the day. Jeffrey Weeks has gone so far as to argue that the permissive society was a 'myth' and that whilst there was a relaxation of sexual thinking in post-war Britain, it must be placed historically alongside 'the strong persistence of what we still call "traditional" attitudes.'⁹³ The seeming acceptance of transsexuality, as represented by April Ashley's media popularity, might be said to be nothing more than the public acceptance of 'traditional' ideas of what it meant to be a woman. Of course, she also made 'good copy' and was a boost to sales, but her newsstand cachet did not necessarily imply that the press would be kind to her. Media viciousness sold as many papers as fairytales – even those with apparently tragic endings.

There was a very clear gap between the way that the British legal and medical establishments viewed April Ashley and the way she was presented in the national press. She

⁹⁰ Marcus Collins, 'The Pornography of Permissiveness: Men's Sexuality and Women's Liberation in Mid Twentieth-Century Britain', *Radical History Review* 47 (1999), p.102.

⁹¹ Jeffrey Weeks, *Sexuality and Its Discontents* (Reprint, London, 2003, orig. 1984), p.19.

⁹² I mean here acceptance in the press in so far as there were, for example, no editorials proclaiming her immorality etc. Transsexuals, of course, still faced widespread discrimination.

⁹³ Weeks, *Sexuality and Its Discontents*, p.20.

was, almost uniformly, portrayed unquestioningly as a woman. It was Arthur Corbett, the heir to the Rowallen family peerage, who was made a laughing stock by the newspapers, particularly on account of his pathetic sexual history. This was only added to by mysterious events after the verdict was announced on 2 February. 'APRIL ASHLEY: HUSBAND IN A COMA', thundered the *Daily Mirror's* full-front page headline (Fig. 6). This was accompanied by a large photo of Ashley, in bikini and high heels, with Corbett at a swimming pool in Spain during happier times. 'Mystery injury as marriage is ended,' it continued, 'Arthur Corbett, husband of sex-change model April Ashley, was found in a coma last night, a few hours after a court had officially ended their marriage.'⁹⁴ Corbett, who had not been in court for the judgement, was found unconscious at the contested villa in Marbella. Quite what happened to Corbett was never explained, and to this day the accident remains a mystery. Ashley did not mention it in *Odyssey* and Corbett himself disappeared from the public eye soon after. Indeed, the last we hear of him is that his father, Lord Rowallen, had 'secretly flown to Spain's Costa del Sol for a reunion with his son' the week after the judgement.⁹⁵ The *Daily Express* headlined the mystery accident thus: 'APRIL ASHLEY'S "HUSBAND" IN A COMA', a use of inverted commas which perhaps placed more suspicion on Corbett's sexuality than hers. The *Daily Mirror*, whose bikini-and-heels photograph left no doubt as to Ashley's sex, dwelt with some relish on Corbett's 'own sexual deviations. He had been attracted to April in the first place because he himself was a transvestite who liked to dress up in women's clothes.'⁹⁶ The press's attitude towards Corbett was, for the most part, one of ridicule. This was perhaps the flipside of his legal team's strategy of 'queering' Ashley. Despite his expressed recantation of his deviant lifestyle, his past dalliances with rent-boys had been laid out in public view. Sinfield suggests that 'any such liaison was interpreted as threatening the social order.'⁹⁷ However, the 'threat' here seems not to be the acts themselves, but media reportage of them. It was in the pages of the tabloids that the damage was done to Corbett's reputation (and by extension that of the ruling class), not in the brothels of Soho. Automatic deference to the

⁹⁴ Anon., 'APRIL ASHLEY: HUSBAND IN A COMA', *Daily Mirror*, 3 February 1970, p.1.

⁹⁵ Ronald Maxwell, 'APRIL ASHLEY'S OWN STORY OF HER AGONY. I AM A WOMAN', *Sunday Mirror*, 8 February 1970, p.1.

⁹⁶ Anon., 'APRIL ASHLEY: HUSBAND IN A COMA', p.1.

⁹⁷ Sinfield, *Literature, Politics and Culture*, p.78.

establishment was by 1970 anachronistic, and it is possible to see media coverage of the trial as being descended from the Profumo affair of 1963. When John Profumo resigned from the government after his involvement with call girls and their Soviet agents became known, the tabloid press reveled in the humiliation of a powerful member of the ruling class. Corbett's public mortification seems cut from the same cloth: he never made a public appearance in Britain again.⁹⁸

The other obvious contextualisation of the Ashley trial would be the Cold War. David Harley Serlin, for example, has made telling links between the famous case of the MTF transsexual, Christine Jorgensen, and Cold War attitudes towards sexuality in 1950s America.⁹⁹ Jorgensen's case, he argues, was an example of the culture of secrecy and revelation which surrounded sex during the period. This may be a stretch, though, for April Ashley, if only because in Britain the effect of paranoia towards the Soviet Union was 'much slighter' than it was in the United States.¹⁰⁰ In the next chapter, I make clear the major impact that the Cold War had on attitudes towards the American transsexual Renée Richards, who was also engaged in a legal fight: to be recognised as a woman for the purposes of playing professional tennis. But her case unfolded alongside the appearance of the 'manly' female athletes of the Soviet bloc at the Olympics, and so necessarily became entangled in Cold War sexual suspicions. There were no obvious parallels between Ashley's case and any Anglo-Russian antagonisms. Sexuality, of which Corbett's team had made such an issue, was admittedly linked to national security in post-war Britain. Guy Burgess and Donald Maclean, two of the 'Cambridge Spies', who defected to the Soviet Union in 1951, had been reported to be homosexual.¹⁰¹ Homosexuality, thus 'linked, in a paranoid way, with communism... (could be) stigmatized as treachery', but no-one attempted to

⁹⁸ As I explained in my Introduction, I am not making use of any of the new narrative material in Ashley's 2006 autobiography, *The First Lady* (in which the sex/gender passages are mostly lifted wholesale from *Odyssey*). However, this snippet from 1963 is simply too good to leave out: 'The journalists put two and two together and got five... They believed I was harbouring Christine Keeler and Mandy Rice-Davies on the Costa del Sol... the press laid siege day and night.' (p.193)

⁹⁹ David Harley Serlin, 'Christine Jorgensen and the Cold War Closet', *Radical History Review* 62 (1995), pp.137-165. See Chapter Six.

¹⁰⁰ Sinfield, *Literature, Politics and Culture*, p.109.

¹⁰¹ Burgess was certainly homosexual. Maclean, on the other hand, was not (he was happily married) and it was only after his defection that his name was 'defamed' with the association.

cast Ashley's case as a Red plot to undermine the British aristocracy by marrying them all off to fake women.¹⁰² The most convincing connection that Ashley had with the Cold War was that much of the newspaper coverage of her highlighted the sort of personal freedom that a British readership would perhaps have understood that they, as liberal capitalists, enjoyed in contrast to the people of communist Russia.¹⁰³ Ashley was free to have the operations, she was free to don sparkling make-up, and free to wear the most beautiful clothes. And, as the *News of the World* showed, she was also free to take them off.

Coverage in the *News of the World* was little more than an edited version of *Corbett v. Corbett*. The text of their article, 'Judgement on April', concentrated on the medical questions raised in the trial, repeating verbatim the notion of 'castrated male' and the 'four criteria'. However, their citation of the ruling that 'Miss Ashley's operation, therefore, cannot affect her true sex' was totally undermined by a half-page 'glamour' photograph of a bare-breasted 'Miss Ashley' from her modeling days (Fig. 7).¹⁰⁴ In the pictorial language of the British tabloid press nothing better signified a woman than naked, or very large, breasts. Later that year, *The Sun* newspaper would begin publishing daily pictures of 'Page Three Girls', topless 'lovelies' and 'stunnas' whose classically passive femininity was telegraphed by their easily-exposed breasts. Inserted into this register of gender stereotypes, the *News of the World's* bare-breasted photograph of Ashley, whether intended to titillate or not, had the result of directly contrasting the scientific with the social. The text said 'man' and the photograph said 'woman'. In the salacious context of the British tabloid press circa 1970, Ashley's breasts, dismissed in the trial as medically unimportant, served as a direct challenge to the ruling's disinterest in such popular sex signs. It seems unlikely, however, that this challenge was intentional on the part of the *News of the World*. The primary reason that their article relied so heavily upon *Corbett v. Corbett* was that Ashley had been paid £5000 by the *Sunday Mirror* for exclusive rights to her story.¹⁰⁵ This was

¹⁰² Sinfield, *Literature, Politics, Culture*, p.87.

¹⁰³ There were ambiguities to this understanding, of course. Ibid., pp.97-129; Robert Hewison, *In Anger: Culture and the Cold War* (London, 1988).

¹⁰⁴ Anon., 'Judgement on April', *News of the World*, 8 February 1970, pp.10-11.

¹⁰⁵ Ashley, *Odyssey*, p.226.

half as much as the *News of the World* had paid Ashley in 1963 (less than half, adjusted for inflation), but still enough to ensure that she spoke to no other newspapers. The *News of the World*, starved of fresh quotes, could do little more than repeat the judge's ruling – enlivened and undercut by Ashley's breasts.

The *Sunday Mirror*, however, only gained exclusive rights to Ashley's story the day after the trial and so on 2 February, the daily press were still able to ask her and her legal team about the ruling. Peter Madok, Ashley's solicitor, fielded many of these questions, repeating his stock challenges to the ruling. 'The problem is a social one,' he told the *Times*, 'Legally she is male, but socially, she is a woman.'¹⁰⁶ Ashley's social womanhood was picked up on in several ways by the press. Her attire, in particular, was of interest, symptomatic of press reportage about women in legal cases. *The Times* wrote that she was 'wearing a blue maxi-coat and a large fur hat', whilst the *Guardian* noted that she 'wore a blue velvet maxi-coat to court.'¹⁰⁷ The *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Sketch* also thought it important to describe Ashley's maxi-coat, although they both thought it was black.¹⁰⁸ The *Express* noted that she matched the maxi with a 'chiffon scarf at her throat.' The maxi-coat, a floor-length dress-style frock, was the fashionable successor to the mini-skirt. Like the mini it was a highly feminine piece and so in noting that Ashley wore it, the newspapers, intentionally or not, passed on this female sex sign to their readers. Indeed, a minor scandal the day after Ashley's case made the headlines (4 February) would show just how sexualised the maxi was. 'RICHARD HARRIS UPSTAGES LA LOLLO IN THE MAXI STAKES' shouted the *Daily Mirror*, publishing twin photos of hell-raising actor Richard Harris and Italian actress Gina Lollobrigida arriving (separately) at Heathrow airport, both wearing maxi coats:

'It's hard to believe that in the fashion stakes a rowdy Irish broth of a boy would leave the lovely Lollo standing at the post... Both have been

¹⁰⁶ Anon., 'April Ashley "left in a sort of limbo"', *The Times*, 3 February 1970, p.3.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., p.3; Anon., 'April Ashley is a man, says divorce judge,' *Guardian*, 3 February 1970, p.6.

¹⁰⁸ Anon., 'A Man! Sex-Change April says I'll still wear my gowns', *Daily Mail*, 3 February 1970, p.5.; Anon., "SEX CHANGE" APRIL ASHLEY IS STILL A MAN SAYS JUDGE', *Daily Sketch*, 3 February 1970, p.7.

smitten by the current maxi-madness... when it comes to breaking new ground, the day's fashion honours must go to Richard Harris. Wearing such a maxi is interesting enough, you might think. But in his choice of accessories, he shows an even greater flair for the unusual. Who else would have teamed such opulence with a simple football shirt?'¹⁰⁹

The maxi was not enough to signify Harris, this 'broth of a boy', as a woman. It was just one feminine sex sign on a body which otherwise very successfully signified 'man'. The contrast, though, highlights the specifically feminine, fashionable, signification of the maxi. In choosing to wear one to court in 1970, Ashley was evidently making good use of this specificity. Accessorising it along with all her other sex signs as a part of her gender performance, she was able to confirm press preconceptions about how a stylish woman would look. So unlikely was the idea of a man in a maxi that the next day the *Daily Mirror* sent one of its reporters out into the streets of London, accompanied by a male model wearing the item in question. The results of this titillating social experiment made perfectly clear the maxi's women-only status: 'People in the street fell about with laughter and blew kisses at our model.'¹¹⁰ A man in a maxi was funny and ridiculous, precisely because it was a uniquely female sex sign. The attention paid to the details of Ashley's maxi (was it black or blue?) were done in all seriousness, quite in contrast to the jokey style of reporting in Harris's case. Ashley's maxi further signified her as a woman, Harris's just played up to the fact that he, nefarious lothario that he was, was so obviously a man.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹ Anon., 'RICHARD HARRIS UPSTAGES LA LOLLO IN THE MAXI STAKES', *Daily Mirror*, 4 February 1970, pp.12-13.

¹¹⁰ Christopher Ward, 'SNAP! I TOOK DEREK OUT IN HIS NEW MAXI-FROCK... and there was this bloke in his old-fashioned mini-skirt', *Daily Mirror*, 5 February 1973, pp.12-13. The bloke in the old-fashioned mini-skirt was a model hired by Jean Rook at the rival *Daily Sketch* to do a similar stunt.

¹¹¹ There are interesting parallels here with the recent photographs of footballer David Beckham wearing a sarong. Commenting on why the photos failed to undermine his status as a man, Andrew Parker and Ellis Cashmore have suggested that Beckham was carving out a new form of masculinity, one into which the 'feminine' values of vanity and attractiveness had been co-opted. A sarong, though evidently a women's clothing item, was not enough to signify David Beckham, father, footballer, sex symbol, and role model, as a woman. Similarly, a maxi was not enough to 'discredit' Richard Harris. Andrew Parker & Ellis Cashmore, "'One David Beckham" Celebrity, Masculinity and the Socceratti', *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 20.3 (2003), pp. 214-232.

Yet the automatic assumption that women wore skirts was open to question at this time. Women in 1970 had far more choice of clothing than ever before. In 1968, Marilyn Horn wrote that there had been a sea-change in the way in which women dressed. 'Gradually (they) have adopted more and more items from the masculine wardrobe, until the differences between masculine and feminine dress today have become more and more obscured.'¹¹² By the time of the Ashley trial, trousers in particular, had become acceptable for women – both in suit form for work, and in jean form for leisure.¹¹³ But this did not work in reverse. Women, by choice, may not have worn skirts, but men *certainly* did not. Hence the amusement in Harris's case. There were also still certain areas in which women's adoption of the male wardrobe met with media opprobrium. At the Paris fashion shows of 1970, which were going on at exactly the same time as Ashley's case. Felicity Green, the *Daily Mirror's* fashion editor posted an article on 2 February, headlined 'HERE COMES THE BRIDE – or is it the blooming groom?', focusing on Yves St. Laurent's new line of trouser suits for women at weddings.¹¹⁴ Accompanied by a photograph of a white silk suit, the article warned that you had 'better check which way the jacket fastens... as a look, sexy and seductive it surely is not. In fact the whole effect of this sobersides collection is well and truly butch.'¹¹⁵ The *Daily Express* was also taken aback by YSL's collection, exclaiming 'SO GIRLS CAN WEAR TROUSERS – EVEN AT THEIR WEDDING!' To their reporter, the suits were 'man-tailored' and 'slightly masculine', putting her in mind of 'the thirties lounge lizards.'¹¹⁶ As Green wrote, 'never before have the Paris fashions been so outrageous or ridiculous.'¹¹⁷ For Ashley, all this gender anxiety meant that she, in her super-feminine maxi and her claim to womanhood, was actually being more sexually conformist than the fashionistas of her day. The judge may have said that she was a man, but, according to the conservative *Daily Mail*, 'she will

¹¹² Marilyn J. Horn, *The Second Skin: An Interdisciplinary Study of Clothing* (Boston, MA., 1968), p.154.

¹¹³ Thessander, *The Feminine Ideal*, p.197.

¹¹⁴ Felicity Green, 'HERE COMES THE BRIDE – or is it the blooming groom?' *Daily Mirror*, 2 February 1970, p.7.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Anon., 'FASHION FROM PARIS: SO GIRLS CAN WEAR TROUSERS – EVEN AT THEIR WEDDING!', *Daily Express*, 2 February 1970, p.5.

¹¹⁷ Green, 'BREASTS AND BOTTOMS. Paris: Is this really what you want?' *Daily Mirror*, 3 February 1970, p.1.

still continue to wear women's clothes, including her 30 evening gowns... she said, "I certainly don't intend to dress as a man at this stage."¹¹⁸

Ashley's maxi successfully signified her as a woman because it worked so well with the rest of the sex signs she projected. Her rejection of androgyny is constantly apparent in media representations of her immediately after the trial. 'I'm absolutely shattered,' several newspapers reported her as saying, 'After all, you can only be what you function as, and I can't function as a man.'¹¹⁹ The *Daily Mirror* agreed, calling the verdict a 'shattering blow to the tall, graceful, girlish Miss Ashley, who seemed to the outside world to have become the woman she always longed to be.'¹²⁰ Directly contrasting the medico-legal decision with the 'outside world' the *Mirror* article, and others, focused on Ashley's social functions as a woman and her success in performing the feminine role. Writing in the *People*, Lord Robin Maugham noted that '*April will continue to be treated as a woman*' in social settings.¹²¹ Maugham's decision to write in support of Ashley, whom he had known for some years, is interesting. A homosexual aristocrat living in self-imposed exile in Casablanca, Maugham added to the air of upper-class sexual intrigue surrounding the story.¹²² It is difficult to gauge whether his media testimony would have undermined the 'establishment' position taken by the law, or merely added to the 'classification' of the case in so far as he was seen as just one more sexually suspect individual. In his article he attempted to circumvent the possibility of such accusations by writing about April as a friend, rather than a fellow-traveller. Maugham wrote that the April Ashley he knew 'looked like a woman and acted like a woman... a slim, elegant young lady... she was essentially feminine.' His litany of her female gender traits culminated in his surety that people would flock to the new club/restaurant Ashley had announced she was opening, and that 'they will be greeted by a

¹¹⁸ Anon., 'A Man!', p.5.

¹¹⁹ Anon., April Ashley "left in a sort of limbo", p.3; Anon., "Shattered" April says: I'll fight to stay a girl', *Daily Express*, 3 February 1970, p.7; Anon., "Shattered" April wants to wed again', *Daily Sketch*, 3 February 1970, p.1.

¹²⁰ James Wilson, 'THE APRIL ASHLEY STORY', *Daily Mirror*, 3 February 1970, p.3.

¹²¹ Lord Maugham, 'Why I think the judge was wrong over April', *The People*, 8 February 1970, p.11. His italics.

¹²² It is also worth noting that Casablanca was where Dr Burou had performed Ashley's transsexual surgery.

person who *whatever* the law may in due course decide, will be to them the embodiment of a gracious and pleasant *hostess*.¹²³ The glamorous, aristocratic, and moneyed social group in which Maugham and Ashley had moved in the 1950s and 1960s was precisely what the *Daily Express* was referring to when it wrote approvingly of how she had 'lived in international society as a woman for nearly ten years.'¹²⁴ This seems to be an establishment challenge to the legal decision. If 'society', in the *Tatler* sense of the word rather than the demographic, had deemed her a woman, what business did the grubby legal profession have in claiming otherwise? Such glittering and elevated social success in passing as a woman was of as much, if not more, interest to the British press as the medical judgements. Even the *News of the World*, which quoted Ormrod almost verbatim over two broadsheet pages, made a point of saying that 'she worked successfully as a female model.'¹²⁵

The newspaper which most embraced Ashley's successful social womanhood was the *Sunday Mirror*, which also carried her exclusive story. That they had then a vested interest in doing so is unarguable. That it was, on the other hand, for Ashley an extended exercise in successful sex signification is also obvious. In a two-week serialisation (down from the six weeks in 1963's *News of the World*) Ashley told the story of 'her agony' to the journalist Ronald Maxwell. Introducing the first article, Maxwell summed up what he felt to be the injustice of the situation. 'She is beautiful. She walks with the elegance and grace of a fashion model. Yet in the eyes of the law she is a man. Last week a divorce court decision made (Ashley) officially masculine. DESPITE her sex change operation. DESPITE the fact that she makes loves as woman.'¹²⁶ For the *Sunday Mirror*, at least, Ashley's ability to have heterosexual intercourse, counted for an awful lot more than it had done in the trial. Maxwell never explained quite what he meant by 'makes love as a woman', but it is clear that he took her ability to be penetrated (as facilitated by her sex-change operation) as a powerful signifier of femininity. In direct contrast to Ormrod's judgement, it was her ability to have sex that signified her body as female, rather than her

¹²³ Ibid. His italics.

¹²⁴ Anon., 'Judge ends a sex change "marriage"', *Daily Express*, 3 February 1970, p.7.

¹²⁵ Anon., 'Judgement on April' p.10.

¹²⁶ Maxwell, 'APRIL ASHLEY'S OWN STORY OF HER AGONY', p.1

'constructed' body delegitimizing the significance of her ability to have sex. Performance trumped the abiding self. Further on in the article (Fig. 8) Ashley herself would make this point again. 'In my mind I have no doubt that I am a true woman and I want to love as woman and make love as woman.'¹²⁷ There was no explanation as to how women were supposed to make love, but she did expand on who they were supposed to make love to. 'My boyfriends are, as a rule, normal, healthy, heterosexual males, with no homosexual inclinations.'¹²⁸ If her 'normal' male boyfriends were heterosexual then she, as their partner, must qualify as a woman. She mentioned one lover, Joey, about whom there was 'nothing strange or homosexual' and with whom, after her operation, she could 'function as a woman in the fullest sense.'¹²⁹ These euphemisms allowed Ashley to remain suitably coy whilst asserting her feminine heterosexual inclinations. She wrote in this vein of the husband she hoped one day to have, asserting that 'he will not be homosexual because I am not interested in men like that... the only form of lovemaking I enjoy is the most straightforward in the world.'¹³⁰ She used her heterosexual desires as a platform to move the representation of herself off into other traditionally female gender roles. 'If I marry again (I want) to become a true mother to the children I would like to adopt.'¹³¹ Indeed, the front page of the paper featured a photograph of Ashley in skirt and fur hat walking wistfully past a pram (Fig. 9). 'I know I would be a very good wife because I am very understanding where men are concerned and I am a very good housewife... I am a super cook, especially with Spanish fish dishes.'¹³² Maternal instincts, homemaking, cooking, listening, making love to a straight man. It was as if there was an official list of wifely, womanly traits and Ashley was ticking them off one by one.

The most simple sex sign at work in the *Sunday Mirror* articles was the way Ashley looked in the accompanying photographs. 'If I stood naked, it is a woman you would see, not a man, and

¹²⁷ Ronald Maxwell, 'I AM NOT A MONSTER... I AM A WOMAN', *Sunday Mirror*, 8 February 1970, p.24.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Ronald Maxwell, 'APRIL ASHLEY'S OWN STORY: THE NEXT MAN I MARRY', *Sunday Mirror*, 15 February 1970, p.20.

¹³¹ Maxwell, 'I AM NOT A MONSTER', p.25.

¹³² Maxwell, 'THE NEXT MAN I MARRY', p.20.

you would see nothing to suggest that I had ever been a man.'¹³³ The picture of Ashley with fashionably bobbed hair and heavily kohled eyes was handpicked to back up this statement. The power of appearances gave Ashley a chance to challenge Ormrod's insistence that surgeries could not change someone's sex. Extemporising, she said:

Every reasonable religious man accepts that the soul is the most important and only indestructible part of a human being, yet the soul cannot be seen or examined. Cannot one accept that the mind, the psychological being, is as important as the body? If one can then one must also accept that someone with an unquestionably female mind and an unquestionably female shape is unquestioningly female.¹³⁴

Ashley's was an appeal to common sense. She looked and acted like a traditional woman, so why not allow her to have the legal status? This was an argument which went down far better in the pages of the tabloid press than it did with the British legal system which, for another three decades continued to deny transsexuals' legal status in their chosen sex.

It is clear, then, that the April Ashley divorce trial was about far more than the 'role of a woman in marriage' as Toril Moi suggested. Certainly, in the *Sunday Mirror* she made significant use of the ideal of mutuality, but longing for a fulfilling man-woman union was as much a tool as a teleology for her. At stake was nothing less than the very basis of sex itself: how did people decide who was a man and who was a woman? This question played itself out as a competition between a variety of sex signs; chromosomes versus dress sense, birth genitalia versus a penetrable neo-vagina. What is of central importance to these competitions was the way in which different authorities (medical science, law, the media) arranged the sex-gender hierarchy to suit their beliefs. For Ormrod, speaking for the medico-legal establishment, it was Butler's 'abiding sex' which gave rise to 'natural' gender roles. Any gender traits not congruent with a

¹³³ *I AM NOT A MONSTER*, p.24

¹³⁴ *Ibid.* p.25

person's birth-sex classification was, by his definition, an illegitimate performance. Against this, April Ashley argued that gender performance itself was sex. She displayed all the correct gender signs of heterosexual femininity in concert with a publicly visible female body shape. Perhaps the most convincing contextualisation of the April Ashley story would be to place her in a historical narrative dealing with the relationship of the individual to the apparatus of state. If one removes the whole notion of 'sex' from the trial, what remains is a person fighting for self-determination in the face of a state trying to safeguard the way in which it classifies its citizen-subjects. In this vein, when Caroline Cossey sued the British government for the right to change her birth certificate from male to female in 1989, the government lawyer, citing the Ashley case, told the European Court of Human Rights that:

In England and Wales the birth certificate constitutes a document revealing not current identity, but historical facts. The system is intended to provide accurate and authenticated evidence of the events themselves¹³⁵

He went on to argue that if citizens could change their sex, why not their age, their parents, their place of birth? It was a defence of the state archive and all the classificatory power that implies. Carolyn Steedman suggests that the archive is not merely an 'expression of state power', but also a symbol of the desire to discover origins and beginnings, which might arguably be analogous to Butler's 'abiding self' in so far as both suggest a need for permanence, or a 'truth' rather than a contingency.¹³⁶ Ormrod believed sex to be permanent, that no amount of plastic surgery and hormonal therapy could make its truth go away. In the end, April Ashley's story might very well be as much about the class into which one is put by the state as it is about the sex one might wish to put oneself into.

¹³⁵ *Cossey v UK*, ECHR 16/1989/176/232, 29 August 1990.

¹³⁶ Caroline Steedman, 'Something She Called a Fever: Michelet, Derrida, and Dust', *The American Historical Review* 106.4 (2001), pp.1162, 1160.

Chapter Six

"But She is a Woman" Renée Richards, Sport, and Sex Anxiety in the Cold War

1976 And All That

It was a question put to almost every woman tennis player on the professional circuit in 1976: what is your opinion of Renée Richards, 'the tennis player who changed sex from male to female'?¹ When Julie Anthony was asked this, after a 'surprising' first round defeat of the sixteenth-seeded Dutch player, Betty Stove, at United States Open in September (a competition into which Richards had been denied entry), she replied,

Dr. Richards has my sympathy. I can understand her demanding her rights to play and earn a living. It would also stimulate the gate, add interest and be terrific for the game. But you've got to look at the bottom line. You cannot allow her to play in women's tennis. Imagine a 19-year old guy who's a terrific player changing his sex to play in women's tennis. He'd beat everybody. I can only say it would blow women's tennis apart.²

In fact, Renée Richards had already begun blowing women's tennis apart. The previous month she had accepted an invitation to compete in the *Tennis Week* Open in South Orange, New Jersey. Then two things happened. First of all, the United States Tennis Association (USTA) declared that women at the Grand-Slam US Open would be required to take a chromosome test to prove their sex. Secondly, several members of the Women's Tennis Association (WTA) declared that they would not play at the *Tennis Week* Open as long as Richards remained in the women's draw. Valerie Ziegenfuss, secretary to the WTA's board of directors explained their stance thus, 'We just felt competing against a man wouldn't help our cause. We had nothing to

¹ Parton Keese, 'Miss Anthony Uses Psychological Edge', *New York Times*, 3 September 1976, p.B5.

² Ibid.

gain, so why do it?"³ The tournament went ahead, with twenty-four WTA members pulling out and a similar number accepting the possibility of playing an MTF transsexual. There loomed the very real possibility that the WTA, less than six years after its foundation, could be torn apart. Billie Jean King was happy to play with Richards. Chris Evert was not.

In asserting her right to play women's tennis, Renée Richards unintentionally highlighted several of the themes in this chapter. The WTA clearly, as the statements from Anthony and Ziegenfuss show, believed her to be a man. In demanding chromosome tests for women competitors, the USTA also revealed that they too, considered Richards to be a man, for they knew full well that she 'could not possibly pass the test.'⁴ In the first section of this chapter I examine why both Associations believed it wrong for a man to play women's professional tennis. In this section, I highlight two major reasons, unfair physical advantages and negative publicity, and I aim to demonstrate what these can tell us about sexual difference, particularly as applied to athletic competition. I also explore Richards's responses to these claims, as laid out in her autobiography, *Second Serve* (1983). In the second section of this chapter, I delineate the divisions between Richards and the two Tennis Associations on how to determine sex. In short, the WTA and the USTA insisted upon a purely chromosomal signification of sex, whilst Richards would plead for other factors, particularly phenotypes and psychological make-up, to be taken into account. The disagreement eventually had its day in court, and this second section also unpicks the ruling in the case of *Richards versus USTA*, fought in the New York State Supreme Court in the summer of 1977. Richards had not passed the chromosome test, admitted the judge, Justice Ascione, 'but she is a woman' nevertheless and must be permitted to play.⁵ Throughout these two sections, we will see how the sporting background to the case affected the way it was played out. I argued in the previous chapter that the ruling against April Ashley was in fact about far more than 'the role of a woman in marriage' and so, in this chapter I will show how Richard's case was about far more than 'limiting requirements for specific categories of athletic

³ Anon., 'WTA members will not play Richards', *The Times*, 21 August 1976, p.5.

⁴ Anon., 'Transsexual Must Take Test To Prove Her Sex', *Los Angeles Times*, 16 August 1976, p.10 (section 3).

⁵ *Richards v. USTA* 400 NYS 2d, (1977) p.272.

competition.⁶ The attempted 'intrusion' by a former man into women's tennis served to further highlight the what Susan Cahn calls the 'controversies surrounding surrounding female athleticism.'⁷ Cahn argues that twentieth-century discussions of women's participation in sport focused upon the question: 'Would women engaging in a traditionally male activity become more manlike?'⁸ The seemingly uncertain sexed status of Renée Richards served to highlight worries about *all* women athletes: was playing sports making them into men? In the middle of the 1970s, such questions became mixed up with the widespread anxiety which Kathy Peiss argues characterises American attitudes during the Cold War, manifest in a culture of 'secrecy, confession, and exposure' regarding sex.⁹

To elucidate this, my focus in the third and final section of this chapter is on an event which happened at the same time as Richards' request to play in the US Open: the 1976 Montreal Olympic Games. It was here that the East German women's team emerged for the first time as a global powerhouse in sporting events, particularly in track and field and swimming. The scale of the East German women's dominance was shocking: they took eleven of thirteen swimming gold medals, with their American counterparts, managing only one. In track and field the GDR women won almost half of the available medals, including nine of fourteen golds. This contrasted with the American women, whose three total medals (no golds), was their worst performance ever. Domestic analysis of the disaster was clear; the East German women were either in reality men, or had taken so many masculinising drugs that they may as well have been men. The accusation was not new; the American press had been criticising Soviet women athletes as 'strong Red ladies' and 'Amazons from the Russian steppes' since the late 1950s, when communist athletes first started beating Americans.¹⁰ As Cahn suggests, such accusations meant that the American teams could 'shed damning images of unsexed, mannish women by displacing them onto Soviet

⁶ Robert Herman, 'Controversy Over Renée Richards Adds Dimension to Sex Role in Sports', *New York Times*, 31 August 1976, p.31.

⁷ Susan K. Cahn, *Coming on Strong: Gender and Sexuality in Twentieth-Century Women's Sport* (Cambridge, MA., 1994), p.3.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Kathy Peiss (ed.), *Major Problems in the History of American Sexuality* (Boston, MA., 2002), p.384.

¹⁰ Cahn, *Coming on Strong*, pp.210, 133.

athletes.¹¹ The American swimmer Rod Strachan demonstrated the persistence of this strategy (which was employed by American men as much as their women team mates) in a 1976 interview with Neil Amdur of *The New York Times*, during which the subject of the East German women's dominance inevitably came up:

The American girls are simply too aware of their femininity. They try to remain looking like girls even though they're in athletics. If you look at the East Germans, they don't look exactly like they're girls. They're quite a bit bigger than most of the men on the American team. They could go out for football at USC. They've got some big guys out there.¹²

The only way for the East Germans to have beaten the Americans was for them to have sacrificed their femininity, to have unsexed themselves. They had become men. And they had done so by cheating. 'I don't think it should come to taking male hormones and steroids,' complained Wendy Boglioli, bronze medalist for America in the 100 metre butterfly.¹³ In many western minds, at an Olympic Games notable for its heated debates on 'professionalism', only communist nations would stoop so low as to turn women into men in pursuit of gold. In the third section of this chapter, then, I will demonstrate how American concerns about communist women athletes operated within the context of the Cold War, and how such concerns mirrored the debates surrounding Renée Richards. Commentary on Richards made use of the same tropology of the 'mannish woman athlete' as did discussions of East German women swimmers. In both cases, sport provided the backdrop for the enunciation of cultural concerns about the apparent dissolution of sexual distinctions. It seemed to be becoming a world in which muscles didn't mean

¹¹ Ibid., p.132.

¹² Neil Amdur, 'E. German Women's Success Stirs US Anger', *New York Times*, 1 August 1976, p.37.

¹³ Gordon S. White, 'A Woman Swimmer Returns With Medals, Bad Memories', *New York Times*, 30 July 1976, p.15.

man and a tennis dress didn't mean *woman*. It was the slippage of traditional sex signs, I argue, which made both Richards and the GDR headline news.

The Bionic Woman

W.E. Hester, Vice President of the USTA, was one of Renée Richards's most vocal critics throughout the summer of 1976. Quizzed by the *Los Angeles Times* as to the cause of his opposition to Richards being granted entry into the US Open, he replied,

I knew Raskind when he was a male, and he was one hell of a player.

He still has a man's muscles, and that's going to give him one hell of an advantage in quickness and how hard he can hit the ball.¹⁴

In her former life as Dr Richard Raskind, Richards had been ranked as one of the world's top ten players over the age of thirty five. Previous to that she had won several tournaments whilst ranked as the number one tennis player in the US Armed Forces – wherein she had served as a Navy ophthalmologist. The most obvious concern held by members of the USTA and the WTA was that in allowing Renée Richards to play, they would in fact be allowing Richard Raskind, a man, to play against women. This would be unfair, ran the argument, because men are on the whole stronger and faster than women. As the *Times* put it, members of the WTA in particular 'claim that Dr. Richards... has an unfair advantage in strength and height.'¹⁵ One of those members, Caroline Stoll, whom Richards beat at the *Tennis Week Open*, agreed, noting that 'Dr. Richards has such an impressive serve, it spins so much. It really isn't fair.'¹⁶ Pondering the Richards case in the *Chicago Tribune*, columnist Joan Beck admitted that 'certainly, there is great overlap between physical strengths and abilities of men and women,' citing the recent successful admission of women to the US Military Academy at West Point as evidence. However, Beck

¹⁴ Anon., 'A Gender Problem at Forest Hills – Chromosome Tests May Be Required', *Los Angeles Times*, 12 August 1976, p.1 (section 3).

¹⁵ Anon., 'Schoolgirl makes Dr Richards battle', *The Times*, 24 August 1976, p.9.

¹⁶ Ibid. Spin, in fact, has little to do with physical strength or height; it is a matter of skill. Stoll here perhaps reveals another, widespread belief about sexual differences in sport: that men are naturally more skillful and adroit. See Cahn, *Coming on Strong*, pp.261-264.

wrote, 'at the level of Olympic and professional competition, even the slightest edge can make all the difference. There is no way women can compete with men as equals in many sports.'¹⁷ Such a conclusion was, argued the WTA's executive director, Jerry Diamond, grounded in medical science. 'As best I can gather from the physicians I talked to,' he said, 'the muscle structure and density of the muscle tissue of a male are superior to a female. There are certain strength and speed advantages that a woman doesn't have.'¹⁸ In all of these arguments Richards is constructed as a man, signified by what was considered to be her superior physical strength and build.

Yet often in the American media coverage of the Richards case this signification seemed to work as much against the WTA as it did against Richards. The *New York Times* reported that there had been 'an aura of invincibility around Dr. Richards as a transsexual' which, in effect, had scared many of the WTA players off.¹⁹ This, argued many commentators, was somewhat hypocritical of the WTA, which had been founded very much on the premise that women's tennis was of equivalent value to men's. Just a few years earlier, the world's top women player, Billie Jean King, had responded to a challenge by Bobby Riggs, a veteran male tennis player. Riggs had declared, 'You insist that top women's players provide a brand of tennis comparable to men's... I contend that you not only cannot beat a top male player but that you can't beat me, a tired old man.'²⁰ King beat Riggs quite soundly in a circus-style Las Vegas match and by the time Richards entered the scene in 1976, the notion that women's tennis was of comparative commercial value to men's was, if not universally held, then at least growing in popularity. In her own autobiography (1982), King put Renée Richards squarely into this context:

¹⁷ Joan Beck, 'Court must face facts on transsexual', *Chicago Tribune*, 5 August 1977, p.2 (Section 3).

¹⁸ Herman, 'Controversy Over Renée Richards,' p.31.

¹⁹ Neil Amdur, 'Richards Bows to Foe, 17' and id., 'Dr. Richards Bows To a Youngster, 17', *New York Times*, 29 August 1976, pp.1, 6.

²⁰ Cited in Nora Ephron, 'The Pig' in id., *Crazy Salad: Some Things About Women* (New York, 1975), p.126.

When she suddenly appeared on the scene, virtually every player immediately assumed that she had to be Wonder Woman. If they had taken the trouble to talk to the men who had played her or watched Renée play for five minutes, they would have seen right away that although she had a great serve she was slow and had bad eyes, even if she is an ophthalmologist.²¹

Richards took up the theme (she herself played Riggs also, at an exhibition match in Vancouver in 1977, and won) in her own autobiography (1983), writing, 'Did they think that anybody, just because she had once been a man, could automatically beat women professionals or even competent amateurs? This attitude was the antithesis of women's liberation.'²² To some, such as columnist Red Smith, the WTA's reaction to Richards made a mockery of their *raison d'être*. He summed up their value argument thus: 'If the women brought as many dollars into the stadium as the men, they were entitled to take as many out.' With this he had no quarrel, at least until,

Along came Dr Richards... This sent the girls scurrying into the weeds sobbing, "No, no! She's a man in disguise. She will make us fragile loveable darlings look bad!"... If the women had believed in their own ability and their own arguments, they would have said, "Let her in. We'll knock the spots off him or her or him or whatever." Instead they hollered copper... and turned chicken.²³

Smith wrote this after Richards had been defeated in the first round of the 1977 US Open, by Britain's Virginia Wade – the previous year's Wimbledon winner. It seemed, to Smith at least, that Richards's easy defeat at Wade's hands had made a mockery of the WTA's worries. It was not a

²¹ Billie Jean King, with Frank Deford, *Billie Jean King: The Story of a Great Tennis Player* (London, 1982), p.155.

²² Renée Richards, with John Ames, *Second Serve: The Renée Richards Story* (New York, 1983), p.345.

²³ Red Smith, 'So Long, Doctor', *New York Times*, 4 September 1977, p.127.

new stance to have taken. A year earlier, sports correspondent Neil Amdur, reporting on Lea Antonopolis's defeat of Richards in the semifinals of the *Tennis Week Open*, had wondered, 'So what was all the fuss about?'²⁴ Here, it seems as though an inversion of the 'muscles = man' sex sign was in play. Lack of physical prowess seemed to legitimate Richards's claim to be a woman. As Susan Birrell and Cheryl L. Cole put it, 'Richards's mediocre performances on court were also used by the press to suggest his/her acceptability as a woman... (her) inability to dominate women's tennis (was) offered as proof of his/her status as a woman.'²⁵ Yet in Birrell and Cole's analysis, informed as it is by Janice Raymond's *Transsexual Empire* (which denies that it is possible to 'truly' change sex), had Richards won, had she actually dominated women's tennis, this would have been an unfair 'benefit... from the hard-won opportunities for women in sport,' benefits which Richards, who had not been born a woman, had had no part in helping achieve.²⁶ There is a *Catch 22* analysis of the Richards affair: if she wins it is unfair on women, if she loses it is a sexist commentary on women's physical abilities.

Richards herself repeatedly denied that she had any sort of physical head start on the other women. 'I do not feel like I have an unfair advantage' she told *The New York Times*, only for the statement to be qualified by a journalist adding, 'said Dr Richards who is 6 feet 2 inches tall.'²⁷ No longer able simply to state that she did not have an advantage, Richards set about using her medical background to prove it. On several occasions, she suggested that the technologies which had enabled her transsexual transition also denied her the supposed physical advantages of the male body. In *Second Serve*, she summarized the arguments she had made at the time in the media,

It had been asserted time and time again that I had more muscle than
a woman of comparable stature; this flies in the face of medical fact. A

²⁴ Amdur, 'Richards Bows to Foe, 17.'

²⁵ Susan Birrell and Cheryl L. Cole, 'Double Fault: Renée Richards and the Construction and Naturalization of Difference' *Sociology of Sport Journal* 7 (1990), p.16.

²⁶ Ibid. p.13.

²⁷ Herman, 'Controversy Over Renée Richards.'

man's muscle mass is sustained by his male hormone, testosterone. Once this is taken away the muscles change in character... The muscle mass on my body was entirely appropriate for a woman my size, especially a woman athlete.²⁸

That last phrase, 'especially a woman athlete' is telling, for it suggests that women athletes are more muscular than non-athletic women. This is likely true, but it also gave Richards the opportunity to point out that there were plenty of other women on the tour who were larger than was usual. She admitted that 'I looked so damn fearsome. At six-feet one-inch,' – her own estimate is shorter than that given in the press – 'I was an intimidating sight standing next to some five-feet four-inches lightweight. Still, Betty Stove was six feet tall, and hefty besides.'²⁹ She also made mention of other taller women players, such as Margaret Court, and emerging young Czechoslovakian star, Martina Navratilova. As I will show below, such comparisons saw Richards co-opting much of the sex anxiety about women in sport; her own 'masculinity' could be seen to highlight the potential lack of femininity in born-women players. Her point about the impact of her female hormones on her muscle mass was taken up in a letter to the *New York Times* by an anonymous transsexual, who wrote that,

Feminization of skin and muscle is by far the biggest difference noticed during the medical procedure that assists the change of roles. Estrogens dramatically affect the percentage of muscle in the body... From my own experience, I would say that after about five years of taking the female hormones a transsexual will have muscular strength hardly different from a chromosomally "normal" woman her size and age.³⁰

²⁸ Richards, *Second Serve*, p.344.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Anon., 'A Transsexual Speaks: Muscles Will Change', *New York Times*, 5 September 1976, p.118.

The letter did admit that Richards's bone structure, 'like mine, is male and cannot be changed... but it is a very small advantage, and any top-level, well-conditioned woman should have no trouble beating Dr. Richards.'³¹ It is the same argument as that put forth by Red Smith: by not dominating physically, she would signify herself as a woman within a language of sexual difference which signified woman through a lack of physical strength as compared to men.

But let us return to Richards's notion of 'a woman athlete,' for all the arguments above seem dependent upon the notion that the athletic sport of tennis is purely a contest of physical prowess. It was, Richards suggested, 'ridiculous to argue about strength since a tennis match is not lost on brute strength' but rather on skill and dexterity, also.³² In short, Richards may have been considerably taller than, say, Billie Jean King or Virginia Wade, but they could be considered better tactical players, better shot-makers than her. King herself signed an affidavit insisting that 'she does not enjoy physical superiority or strength so as to have an advantage over women competitors in the sport of tennis.' A major plank of King's campaign to have the WTA taken seriously had been the skill and talent of women players, rather than their physical power.³³ Yet even this argument failed to convince some commentators, such as Joan Beck in the *Chicago Tribune*, who insisted that 'the ophthalmologist has lived for almost 40 years as a male, has a male's height... and has developed tennis skills as a male.'³⁴ Here, Beck co-opted a further male sex-sign, that of competitive manual dexterity, what Susan Cahn calls 'the associations between masculinity and skill.'³⁵ It became for her a question of comparing the skills a woman would have learned and those a man would have learned, and she clearly believed the man's talents to be greater. The core objection remained: it is not fair to let men, who are better/stronger/more skilled at sport than women, play women's tennis. The objection itself was based on common language of sexual difference that signified (and naturalized) men as stronger and smarter than women.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Richards, *Second Serve*, p.344.

³³ Neil Amdur, 'Dr. Richards Gets Support of Mrs. King', *New York Times*, 11. August 1977, p.D13.

³⁴ Beck, 'Court must face facts,' *Chicago Tribune*, p.2 (Section 3).

³⁵ Cahn, *Coming on Strong*, p.261.

Yet Renée Richards was, after all, only one transsexual who, it became increasingly apparent, was not the juggernaut many had feared. 'One of the ironic problems,' Richards told a press conference, 'is that they think of me as a bionic woman... I'm not the world beater they think I am. I would be a contender at Forest Hills. But in a one-shot in the stadium against Chris Evert, you'd have to bet on her.'³⁶ Or Virginia Wade, or Lea Antonopolis, or Billie Jean King – all of whom beat Richards soundly. Alongside the disagreements over Richards's strength advantage, another objection was being raised to her, however, what Richards herself referred to as the 'floodgate theory.' In this, Richards herself is not the worry, but rather the precedent she would set by being allowed to play. If she were granted entry to the US Open, or to other WTA-sanctioned events, 'the floodgates would be opened and through them would come tumbling and endless stream of made-over Neanderthals who would brutalize Chris Evert and Evonne Goolagong.'³⁷ As even her supporter and sometime doubles partner, Billie Jean King, said, 'The real issue is not Renée. The real issue is the future.'³⁸ Fuel was added to this fire by W.E. Hester, who reported a spectre of the 'future' to the *Los Angeles Times*: a '6-foot-8-inch, 240 pound transsexual' had applied to the WTA for a berth in a tournament in one of the southern states.³⁹ Then the *New York Times* broke the stories of Michelle Norberg, a twenty-eight-year-old MTF transsexual who announced at the end of 1976 that she intended to try for the University of Utah women's tennis team, and Arlene Karasick, a thirty-year-old MTF transsexual tennis player who had visited a doctor in order to take the chromosome test that would permit her to play on the women's tennis tour.⁴⁰ Both women expressly connected their decisions to the publicity

³⁶ Neil Amdur, 'Renée Richards Set To Refuse to Take Sex Test', *New York Times*, 18 August 1976, p.31; Norman Fox, 'Renée Richards Rejects Sex Test', *The Times*, 19 August 1976, p.8.

³⁷ Richards, *Second Serve*, p.345.

³⁸ Dave Anderson, 'The Second Time Around for Renée', *New York Times*, 16 April 1976, p.42.

³⁹ Anon., 'A Gender Problem at Forest Hills.' The rumour (never substantiated) was repeated again in Dave Anderson, "In a Glass Cage" With Renée', *New York Times*, 2 September 1976, p.38.

⁴⁰ Neil Amdur, 'Women's Tennis Faces Challenge By Transsexuals', *New York Times*, 31 December 1976, p.13.

surrounding Richards. 'When Renée came forward, that made her a heroine in my eyes,' said Norberg.⁴¹

For a while it did seem to many that it was only a matter of time before the WTA was invaded by Richard's 'stream of made-over Neanderthals,' but they never materialised. Karasick did not pass her chromosome test and Norberg was never heard from again. As Richards herself noted at the time, 'I'd be surprised if more than five or six transsexuals came into tennis over the next 15 or 20 years.'⁴² It was less even than that; to this day Richards remains the only MTF transsexual to have played professional tennis. She made the point again in her autobiography,

'Of course, this was sheer nonsense. Where would these people come from?... But suppose... that someone did it for money? Some player who was not quite good enough in men's tennis might decide to change only in order to overpower the women players... this fear is pretty much groundless. How hungry for tennis success must you be to have your penis chopped off in pursuit of it? How many men would do it for a million dollars?'⁴³

Put that way, the 'floodgate theory' does seem faintly ridiculous, particularly with the benefit of hindsight. Even in 2004, when the Olympic Games first permitted post-operative transsexuals to compete in their 'new' sex classifications, none did so. Yet a decade or so after the Richards affair, Birrell and Cole did not think it ridiculous. They responded to Richards's hypothetical 'how hungry?' by suggesting that 'the US obsession with sport makes it not at all unlikely that some man would willingly sacrifice his penis for victory; drug abuse, steroid abuse...overtraining, and risking life-threatening or severe injuries are all a part of the modern sports scene.'⁴⁴ I would point

⁴¹ Ibid., p.16.

⁴² Anderson, "In a Glass Cage".

⁴³ Richards, *Second Serve*, p.345. Note how Richards, like most FTM autobiographers, equates being a woman with having the penis removed.

⁴⁴ Birrell and Cole, 'Double Fault', p.18.

out, though, that none of these dangerous activities actively harms the sportsman's masculinity nor his claim to be a man. Indeed, most of them would be seen to enhance it in the traditional view of active masculinity. Sporting success is in itself a powerful sexual signifier for 'man' – to remove the penis, the most powerful signifier of 'man' of all, as I showed in Chapter One, would completely defeat the object of being successful at sport for a male. However, the floodgate theory, and its accompanying possibilities of huge lumbering 'men in tennis dresses' does point to another, perhaps more valid objection raised to Richard's participation: that it was bad for the image of women's tennis.

Already we have seen that some commentators felt that the WTA's 'fear' of the 'invincible' Richards made them look like bad sports at best, and hostile to 'liberal notions of human rights' at worst.⁴⁵ Accompanying this was the worry that the entire case was turning the sport into a carnival act. In an interview with *Sports Illustrated*, the USTA President Stan Malless complained that, 'It's all a joke to some people, but it really isn't funny.' He went on to accuse Richards of using the publicity for her own financial gain. 'I'll bet he/she has half a book written already.'⁴⁶ As Richards herself admitted, her very presence at any tournament caused an 'unstoppable onslaught of newspeople', most of whom were after the transsexual story, rather than the tennis results.⁴⁷ Jeannie Brinkman, director of the WTA, despaired of the non-stop coverage, 'We've spent the last eight years trying to build women's tennis. We don't need that kind of publicity.'⁴⁸ What Brinkman meant by 'that kind of publicity' was the sort of 'unsavory innuendo' that featured in many of the stories about Richards: veiled hints as lesbianism on the WTA tour, the air of sexual scandal still attached to transsexuality in the mid-1970s.⁴⁹ 'It's turning the event into a circus' warned Sue Stockton, whose husband, Dick, played professionally. "Come and see the

⁴⁵ Ibid. p.7.

⁴⁶ Ray Kennedy, 'She'd Rather Switch – And Fight', *Sports Illustrated*, 6 September 1976, p.16.

⁴⁷ Richards, *Second Serve*, p.329.

⁴⁸ Neil Amdur, 'Vexed USTA Orders Sex Test for Women', *New York Times*, 15 August 1976, p.47.

⁴⁹ On the association of lesbianism with women's sport see Cahn, *Coming on Strong*, pp.175-185.

freakshow!" she added, not entirely jokingly.⁵⁰ Perhaps worst of all, the controversy had resulted in several of the top women players becoming involved in public arguments about Richards. Billie Jean King, for example, played in several tournaments with Richards, provoking the ire of Chris Evert, who suggested that until Richards took a chromosome test to prove her sex, 'we don't have anything settled, and all the women should stick together.'⁵¹ Betty Stove, another top-ranked player sided with Evert. 'I was very surprised,' she said of King's decision, 'I would have thought that Billie would be loyal to women's tennis... I think it's a sour thing she did.'⁵² Between the sexually-prurient stories about sex-changes and the 'cat-fights' amongst the women tennis players (whom letter writers to the *New York Times* had already called 'graceless' and 'hiding behind their skirts'⁵³), what was being raised here were the worst sorts of traditional stereotypes about women. Alongside these clichés, a large amount of sexual anxiety was in operation. There was a man hiding out as a woman. The women were being manly by playing sport – especially the bigger ones like Stove and Navratilova. The women were cast by the media as uncertain about what made them women: was it their lack of strength or their chromosomes? If one of the sporty, athletic women playing tennis – Richards – used to be a man, how many of the others used to? The image of the athlete, as Catherine MacKinnon said in 1982, 'has been a male image' and thus any women who claimed 'athlete' as an identity in the 1970s ran the risk of masculinising herself, of being denied her womanhood.⁵⁴ In trying to masculinise Richards, the WTA ran the risk of making their own players sexually uncertain in the public eye; they exposed them to Susan Cahn's central question about women and sport: did it make them masculine?⁵⁵ And if they did not make them sexually uncertain, then they ran the equally damaging risk of having them appear childish by refusing to play someone who might be stronger than them. Both possibilities undermined the stated aims of the WTA: to provide a profitable, professional

⁵⁰ Herman, 'Controversy Over Renée Richards,' p.31.

⁵¹ Neil Amdur, 'Rebuff to Mrs. King Causes A Split in Women's Tennis', *New York Times*, 23 March 1977, p.B5.

⁵² *Ibid.* p.B6.

⁵³ 'Letters – Renée Richards Controversy: What is a Woman?', *New York Times*, 5 September 1976, p.118.

⁵⁴ Catherine MacKinnon, 'Women, Self-Possession and Sport,' in *id.*, *Feminism Unmodified: Discourses on Life and Law* (Cambridge, MA., 1987), p.119.

⁵⁵ Cahn, *Coming on Strong*, p.3.

environment for women's tennis which did not bow to old-fashioned stereotypes about women's physical or mental capacities. It was because of this that the WTA was, from the very outset, supportive of the USTA's decision to impose chromosomal sex-tests upon all women competitors in the 1976 US Open. They hoped that such a test, with its supposed yay-or-nay outcome, would provide a definite answer as to the question of who was a woman for the purposes of athletic competition. I want then now to explore the ways in which the WTA and the USTA tried to make chromosomes the ultimate sex signs, and the ways in which Richards sought to raise other, more malleable, signifiers in their place.

Reasonable Test, Lousy Test

A short aside in Dinah Eng's *National Observer* gossip column, 'Speaking of People,' laid out the divisions between Richards and the USTA / WTA on sex distinction very clearly,

Richards won at La Jolla, CA., where she was accepted for competition on the basis of gynecological examination. But Chris Evert, president of the WTA, said she thought Richards should have a chromosome test, as is required at the Olympics, to determine if she is a female and eligible to compete in women's events.⁵⁶

The sex-change operation that Richards had undergone in 1974 had, like all MTF genital surgical procedures, provided her with a functioning vagina (in so far that it could be penetrated) and a neo-clitoris. As everyone involved on either side of the debate knew full well, there existed no equivalent procedure which would transform her XY chromosomes into the XX pairing that would signify 'woman.' As W.E. Hester said, 'You can only play with what you're born with. It'll be damn near impossible for Raskind to change what he is.'⁵⁷ An Associated Press report, taken up by the *Los Angeles Times*, concurred, noting that 'a sex-change operation does not affect a person's genes. So Richards could not possibly pass the test – unless she was born (as Raskind) with

⁵⁶ Dinah Eng, 'Speaking of People', *National Observer*, 21 August 1976, p.6.

⁵⁷ Anon., 'A Gender Problem at Forest Hills.'

female hormones, an extreme improbability.⁵⁸ Right up until the court judgment which eventually permitted her to play on the WTA tour, journalists and commentators maintained faith with the absolutism of chromosomal testing. 'The sex organs can be altered,' wrote Joan Beck in the *Chicago Tribune*, 'as is done in transsexual surgery... But the sex chromosomes themselves – the individual's unique genetic blueprint – cannot be altered.'⁵⁹ 'Doctors say,' confided Eng in her gossip column without actually naming any doctors, 'the sex-change operation performed on Richards did not alter the male chromosome pattern.'⁶⁰ Chromosomes, it seemed, were immutably correct sex signs, constant and unchanging.

However, the test that the USTA imposed upon women in the 1976 US Open, may not have been as infallible as the chromosomes it sought out. The Barr Body test was named after Dr Murray Barr, who had shown that when a cell contains two X chromosomes (XX – female), the second X only functions during the formative weeks of prenatal life. After that it coils in on itself, being easily identifiable as a dark spot on the nucleus of the cell. The coiled-up chromosome is known as a sex chromatin, or 'Barr Body.' Yet as Bernice Hausman has pointed out in her own brief analysis of Richards's case, 'it is a test that some "real women" would fail. This could be due to the inherent inaccuracy of the test, or the fact that not all individuals raised as women have an XX chromosome distribution.'⁶¹ From the moment that the USTA announced the imposition of the tests, Richards opposed them on these very grounds. 'On principle, I'm not going to take it. I'm not sure whether I would pass the test. The odds are likely that I wouldn't, but there are some

⁵⁸ Anon., 'Transsexual Must Take Test Prove Her Sex', *Los Angeles Times*, 15 August 1976, p.10 (Section 3).

⁵⁹ Beck, 'Courts Must Face Facts.'

⁶⁰ Eng, 'Speaking of People.'

⁶¹ Bernice L. Hausman, *Changing Sex: Transsexualism, Technology, and the Idea of Gender*, (Durham, NC., 1995) p.12. The individuals without XX chromosomes raised as women, Hausman notes, are 'intersex infants with XY chromosomes but minimal phallic development (who) are generally raised as girls, regardless of genetic or gonadal indicators.' p.205, n.54. A particularly unfortunate case of this was that of David Reimer, whose penis was destroyed in a circumcision when he was a baby. He was raised as a girl under the supervision of John Money. He eventually reverted to the male role, but killed himself at the age of 38. See John Colapinto, *As Nature Made Him: The True Story of the Boy Who Was Raised as a Girl* (New York, 2000); Judith Butler, 'Doing Justice to Someone' in id., *Undoing Gender* (New York, 2004), pp.57-74.

transsexuals who have passed it. The sex chromosome test is a lousy test.⁶² She repeated the 'lousy' accusation repeatedly over the summer of 1976, making good use of her own medical background to point out why. 'I've done a little bit of research on sex chromosome tests... They can vary from one individual to another, and from day to day. They cover a broad spectrum and produce a funny kind of result.'⁶³ She elaborated on this in a news conference at her home club (the John Wayne Tennis Club) in California:

The so-called chromosome test is a poor laboratory choice... There are many varieties of chromosome patterns and the test is not always a simple xx (sic) female or xy (sic) male result. One in every 4000 has abnormal chromosomes. There are xo's, xxy's, xyy's, single x's, and a whole mosaic of possibilities. There are probably people in this room right now other than myself who might fail the so-called sex test for their sex on any given day.⁶⁴

But none of the women at the 1976 US Open did fail the test. 'There will be no exceptions,' the tournament director, Mike Blanchard, had announced, 'anyone who does not take the test will not be allowed to play.'⁶⁵ None of the other women players objected to the tests. 'I certainly don't mind taking it,' said the tenth-seeded Dianne Fromholtz, 'I've spoken to the top-eight players and none of them mind, either.'⁶⁶ It was imperative that the women players of the WTA did not appear anxious about taking the tests; any refusals would merely have added to the cloud of sexual confusion that had descended upon their sport. There is, of course, a somewhat sinister element to this, as evinced in Fromholtz's statement, which seems to me a version of the tautologous justifications that 'if you've got nothing to hide, you won't mind being searched and having your

⁶² Neil Amdur, 'Renée Richards Will Refuse to Take Sex Test for Tennis', *The New York Times*, 18 August 1976, p.29.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p.31.

⁶⁴ Anon., 'Renée Richards Pursuing Tennis Career for a Cause', *New York Times*, 19 August 1976, p.45.

⁶⁵ Anon., 'Sex Tests For Open Under Way', *New York Times*, 28 August 1976, p.38.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

phone tapped.' For Richards this was the other point of principle on which she opposed the tests. Drawing on the test's history, she told Neil Amdur, 'the test was designed by the Olympic Committee for cases other than mine.'⁶⁷ As we shall see below, chromosome testing had first been introduced (actually in 1966 by the European Athletics Championships Committee) in order to identify men masquerading as women in track and field events. The tests were inaugurated after pressure from western athletes complaining about 'masculine' Soviet-bloc women competitors. These tests were designed to stop sexual deception, Richards argued. Her case was quite different, as she openly admitted to her transsexual status and was trying to fool no-one as to her past. This was to form a vital plank of her legal case against the USTA.

The USTA, however, were not moved either by Richards's attack on the test's veracity nor on its suitability as regards her specific case. 'The chromosome test is considered a reasonable screening test,' noted the USTA's lawyer, George Gowen, 'I believe we could not make any other decision but to ask her to take the test.'⁶⁸ Yet she would not take the test, and so she was banned from the 1976 US Open, which was won eventually by Chris Evert, who beat Evonne Goolagong (it is no coincidence that these are the two players Richards names in *Second Serve* as those worried about being brutalised by marauding transsexuals). In April of the following year, however, Richards announced that she had taken the test privately in California *and again* in Arkansas – and passed it.⁶⁹ 'My first reaction,' she said, 'was "Great, now I'll be able to play all the big tournaments. My second reaction was, "Aw, shucks. I won't have any psychological advantage over the other girls any more.'⁷⁰ Such levity was misplaced – if anything it seemed to anger the USTA further. Their response was curt. 'We haven't seen the tests or been notified of them,' said a spokesman, 'but they sound very interesting and surprising.'⁷¹ 'Interesting and surprising' served as USTA code for 'extremely improbable' and over the next few weeks they

⁶⁷ Amdur, 'Richards Will Refuse.'

⁶⁸ Anon., 'A Gender Problem at Forest Hills'.

⁶⁹ Richards, *Second Serve*, p.355; Anon., 'Renée Richards In New Dispute Over Sex Test', *New York Times*, 5 April 1977, p.29.

⁷⁰ Anon., 'Renée Richards Reports She Has Passed Sex Test', *The New York Times*, 8 April 1977, p.27.

⁷¹ Mike Burns, quoted in Al Harvin, 'People in Sports: USTA to Review Tests on Dr Richards', *New York Times*, 9 April 1977, p.31.

worked at making Richards's test results seem like just that. In *Second Serve*, Richards recalls that they 'had demanded that I take the test again', this time at the USTA's official medical centre at Lenox Hill, NY.⁷² 'There's no distrust of any other tests,' W.E. Hester (he of the 240-pound transsexual) assured the press, 'it's a matter of standardization.'⁷³ The WTA then deputized Dr David Fedderman, Chair of medicine at Stanford University, to explain just why a successful test for Richards was so 'surprising.' An endocrinology specialist, Fedderman had been brought in to counter the criticisms that Dr Richards had made of the tests. He did so by use of a particularly potent sex sign:

The finding of a positive Barr Body test in a person alleged to have been a fertile male is extraordinarily difficult to explain. When confronted with such results I would ordinarily repeat the test.⁷⁴

Richards, it transpired, had previously been married and had a son. The successful male heterosexuality implied in this went a long way towards signifying Renée Richards as a man. Beyond anger at what harm the publicity might do to her son (Richards called Fedderman's statement 'as tactless and indiscreet a statement as any I've heard in twenty years of medicine' – once again making use of her own professional expertise) this revelation merely added to the USTA / WTA's contention that there was a deep, immutable basis to sex distinction and that Richards – a father! – could not escape from it. Nevertheless, whilst it harmed Richards's cause, it must also have added further to the element of sexual anxiety surrounding the tour: a dad in a dress and how many others? Because of this the two tennis Associations were keen to bring matters to a close. They made a final statement: Richards was to take the test at Lenox Hill, or never to be considered for entry into the US Open or any WTA-sanctioned tour event. Richards, fresh from her defeat of Bobby Riggs in an exhibition match in Vancouver, refused. 'It had begun to gall me more and more that I was being deprived of a proper showcase for my competitive

⁷² Richards, *Second Serve*, p.355.

⁷³ Neil Amdur, 'US Open Won't Recognise Test Taken by Dr. Richards', *New York Times*, 13 April 1977, p.23.

⁷⁴ Neil Amdur, 'Mrs. King on the Path to Youth', *New York Times*, 14 April 1977, p.91.

spirit. The more I thought about it, the more my blood boiled – when I got back to New York I looked for a lawyer.⁷⁵ If neither side could convince one another of their medical position, then the case would have to go to court.

However, railing against the chromosome test had not been Richards's only strategy. Whilst she campaigned against Barr Bodies as a valid sex sign, she was simultaneously fighting to have other sex signs – particularly phenotypes and psychological make-up – put in their place. From the very beginning of her quest to play professional women's tennis, Richards had been supported by Gene Scott, the director of the *Tennis Week* tournament. It was he who first made the case for a genital signification of 'woman' in Richards's case when explaining to the *Los Angeles Times* why he had asked her to play,

I accepted her on the gynecological affirmation that she is a woman.

There is no rule in tennis that any tests must be used to determine what a woman is. The phenotype test is what I used, consisting of physical tests – hormone levels, breast development, facial hair etc. I did not use... a genotype test to check her chromosomes.⁷⁶

For Scott – and Richards – the shape of the body, its public appearance was what ought to be significant of its sex. As Richards herself said, she was 'not against a test of some sort to identify a person's sex... for athletic competition,' she just felt that in the case of transsexuals those tests ought to be far more wide-ranging, 'including... bodily characteristics and psychological state.'⁷⁷ These, she felt, she could pass easily, arguing that her 'phenotype – (my) primary and secondary physical sex characteristics – is female... As a result of the sex-change operation, (my) body is

⁷⁵ Richards, *Second Serve*, p.360.

⁷⁶ Anon., 'A Gender Problem at Forest Hills.' pp.1, 9. Scott's definition of 'phenotype' is strategic; it is questionable whether hormone levels are phenotypic. What hormone levels are, of course, is changeable by transsexual medical technologies, which is why he uses them.

⁷⁷ Herman, 'Controversy Over Renée Richards.'

that of a female and (I) have a female hormone level.'⁷⁸ That her argument bears such similarities to that of April Ashley in the UK some ten years before her should be no surprise. The technological limits of transsexuality ensure that transsexuals must fight to make valid only those sex signs which either a) medical science can alter for them, such as body shape and hormone level, or b) they possessed pre-operatively, such as particular gender traits.

Richards was perhaps less successful than Ashley in this endeavor. Richards, an athletic tennis player, did not have the instant access to feminine glamour that so benefited the supermodel Ashley. Simply by being a sporty women in a world that, as her own case proved, remained suspicious of female athletic prowess, she had already muffled herself in terms of clearly speaking the common language of sexual difference. Cahn's 'disparaging image of the "mannish" woman athlete still held sway' over the public imagination, and Richards seemed to embody it.⁷⁹ Birrell and Cole, however, have argued that the US media presented Richards unproblematically as a woman, 'accomplished through their choice of personal pronouns and through the descriptions of Richards they drew for their readers.'⁸⁰ The first charge is nothing surprising, and the second is simply false. From Christine Jorgensen down, the American media (and, indeed, its British counterparts) have referred to MTF transsexuals as 'she' – as much for ease of reading as for any progressive political purposes. As to the descriptions drawn of Richards, once Birrell and Cole actually analyse them, they change their judgment to 'ambiguous,' citing this passage from *The New York Times*,

At 6 feet 2 inches, Dr Richards, who weighs 147 pounds, is considerably taller than most women, even women athletes. She has tight muscles in her calves, the kind you might expect to see on a male sprinter or a halfback in football. Yet her facial features – the high cheekbones, the brown eyes and the sharply defined eyebrows – are

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Cahn, *Coming on Strong*, p.207.

⁸⁰ Birrell and Cole, 'Double Fault,' p.8.

distinctly feminine. She also carries herself considerably smoother than many female athletes, although someone quibbled today that her perfume was "a little heavy for such a big woman."⁸¹

Birrell and Cole suggest that this ambivalent description of Richards 'legitimizes physicality as a valid means for assessing one's sex status, thus confusing the issue of the sex/gender relationship and obscuring the cultural production of such relationships.'⁸² The problem with such an analysis is that, historically speaking, in mid-1970s American culture – even culture as rarified as the *New York Times* – physicality was a perfectly valid sex sign. The reason that Amdur mentions build (which goes against Richards) and facial features (which go for her) is precisely because they were among the chief ways in which, lacking a handy chemistry set or access to someone's genitals, people assessed sex. It is not a legitimation of physicality, but an operation within the common languages of sexual difference. It is not an obscuration of cultural production, but simultaneously an *act* of *both* cultural production and consumption: it is what Amdur knows his readers will understand when they are contemplating sexual difference. And then, having fled from 'the framing of Richards as female' to 'ambiguous' descriptions of her within less than a page, Birrell and Cole fail also to notice that, 'for the purpose of sporting competition' it is Amdur's first set of sex-signs, those which focus on Richard's height and weight, which were of concern. They miss then the sporting context to the discussion of 'what is a woman?' Neither Richards nor the WTA was going to suggest that plucked eyebrows constituted an entry requirement to the Virginia Slims tournament. This, though, was precisely where the sexual anxiety crept in: by dismissing such ephemeral yet popular signs of femininity as valid signs of womanhood whilst also trying to invalidate muscularity for the same purposes, the athletic women of the WTA left themselves open to the possibility of ambiguous descriptions of their own. As Johnette Howard argues, 'women athletes had become used to being treated with condescension or derided as

⁸¹ Amdur, 'Renée Richards, Angry, Resolute.'

⁸² Birrell and Cole, 'Double Fault,' p.9.

mannish freaks, arrested tomboys, or some exaggerated horde of closeted lesbians.⁸³ The WTA's arguments against Richards seemed to support such derision.

An Associated Press report pronounced that, 'at 6 feet 2 inches and 145 pounds' 'Dr Richards displays traits associated with both sexes. The soft, husky voice is mostly male, but the high cheekbones, shapely legs, graceful gold-pierced earrings and peach nail polish to match her peach Kochini sweater are distinctly female.'⁸⁴ This is interesting on two levels: firstly, it takes Richards's legs as a female sex sign, whereas Amdur had seen them as male, which demonstrates the malleability of bodily sex signs through written language: 'muscled' makes them male, whilst 'shapely' makes them female. Secondly, it is one of the very, very few physical descriptions of Renée Richards that go beyond her height. An 'encouraging' interview with Richards in *The New York Post*, made almost no mention of the way she appeared other than that she was tall, for a woman.⁸⁵ It is apparent that no-one covering Richards's story felt it to be a question of ultimately defining 'woman' but rather of defining 'woman' for the purposes of sports, where muscularity and height counted far more than cheekbones and sweaters. Yet as I have suggested, the very fact that the Richards case was focused upon sport, and specifically women in sport, meant that it went further than that and became an issue of generalized sexual anxiety.

Unable to convince the USTA and WTA that her body shape made her a woman, Richards sued them together in the summer of 1977. Her lawyer was, of all people, Roy Cohn, a former assistant to Senator Joseph McCarthy. After the collapse of McCarthy's communist witch hunts, Cohn was appointed Assistant Attorney General, and controversially and successfully prosecuted Julius and Ethel Rosenberg as communist spies, for which they were executed.⁸⁶ The phrase 'Cold War' does not actually crop up in any of the discussions about Richards, but the presence

⁸³ Johnette Howard, *The Rivals: Chris Evert Versus Martina Navratilova* (London, 2006), p.46.

⁸⁴ *Associated Press Reports*, 19 August 1976, *New York Times*, 19 August 1976, p.45. Richards's weight vacillates between media outlets.

⁸⁵ Richards, *Second Serve*, p.328.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.* p.361. Cohn suggested on numerous occasions that he had influenced the selection of the judge in the case, ensuring a Justice who would favour the death penalty. After his death from AIDS, Cohn was revealed to have been a practicing homosexual. It is unlikely that his accepting a 'transsexual rights' case was down to progressive/queer politics.

of Cohn as her counsel is a stark reminder of the wider historical context to her story, which we will see more of in the next section. The case itself, unlike April Ashley's in the previous chapter, was resolved very quickly. Richards filed complaint on 2 August 1977. The judge, Justice Alfred Ascione, returned a verdict two weeks later, on 16 August. Richard's argument was simple: she was legally a woman and should be allowed to play on the WTA tour. In support, her lawyers produced signed affidavits to the fact from, amongst others, Dr. John Money of the Johns Hopkins University Gender Clinic, and Dr. Roberto Granato, the surgeon who had performed the vaginoplasty on Richards. Granato wrote that her body was, chromosomes aside, now 'that of a woman who had been hysterctomized and ovariectomized.'⁸⁷ As Susan Keller has written, this is entirely in keeping with transsexual narratives. Granato's affidavit, she writes, 'makes sense if the goal is to achieve a consistency among anatomy, self-perception, and appearance,' even if, in the affidavit itself, 'it was as if she had a history of internal organs that she had never in fact possessed.'⁸⁸ There was also an affidavit signed by Billie Jean King, testifying that Richards enjoyed no competitive advantage as a transsexual. Richards's legal team had two other arguments: to suggest that the chromosome test was aimed maliciously at her, and that her being permitted to play was a human rights issue. In response, the USTA argued, in the words of their attorney, Peter Leisure, 'It would be unfair to have women who have worked hard and prepared for this tournament beaten by a person who is more than a woman.'⁸⁹ It is perhaps well for Leisure that King herself was not present in court to hear this synonym for 'man', especially when it was taken up thematically by the attorneys representing the WTA. They produced affidavits from Francoise Durr, Janet Newberry and Kristien Kremmer-Shaw, all top-ranked players, who testified that Richards had palpable advantages in height and strength. The WTA argued that 'hundreds of thousands of young players would be materially affected' by allowing Richards and, by dint other transsexuals, into their Association.⁹⁰ Both the USTA and the WTA, however, returned continually to the theme of the chromosome test, which Richards would not take.

⁸⁷ *Richards v. USTA*, p.272.

⁸⁸ Susan Etta Keller, 'Operations of Legal Rhetoric: Examining Transsexual and Judicial Identity', *Harvard Civil Rights – Civil Liberties Law Review*, 34 (1999) p.8.

⁸⁹ Amdur, 'Dr. Richards Gets the Support of Mrs. King', p.15.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

Both sides, then, had set out to define 'woman' for the purposes of athletic competition. But this was not, ultimately, what Justice Ascione would decide the case on. He focused instead on one of the Richards team's other arguments in favour of her being granted entry to the US Open: that the USTA, 'which had previously used anatomical inspection to determine players' sex, required that Richards... take a test which she would undoubtedly fail.'⁹¹ It was on these grounds, that the USTA had in effect victimised Richards, that Ascione found in her favour under New York State human rights provisions. He called the use of the Barr Body test in this case 'grossly unfair, discriminatory and inequitable,' and went on to say,

It seems clear that defendants knowingly instituted this test for the sole purpose of preventing plaintiff from participating in the tournament. The only justification for using a sex-determination test in athletic competition is to prevent fraud, ie: men masquerading as women competing against women... The unfounded fears and misconceptions of defendants must give way to the overwhelming medical evidence that this person is now female.⁹²

It was, unquestionably, a sweet victory for Richards. Nevertheless, Ascione's ruling that 'overwhelming medical evidence' signified her as a woman was clearly linked to the unjust actions of the USTA in imposing the test in order to exclude her. Had Richards been a long-jumper or a hurdler, and had sought to compete in events organised by the American Olympic Commission (who, like all Olympic Commissions, had used chromosome tests since 1966), the judgment may not have gone her way because there could have been no argument for malicious exclusion. The AOC had already decided what a woman was, whilst the USTA seemed to have changed their mind in response to Richards. The ruling very carefully did not strike down the Barr Body test, which Ascione conceded was 'a recognized and acceptable tool for determining sex.'

⁹¹ Keller, 'Operations of Legal Rhetoric,' p.27.

⁹² *Richards v. USTA*, p.267.

In terms of the signs which determined sex, Ascione admitted that they were myriad, but advised that if an individual possessed a fair majority of female sex signs, then that should be enough. 'Most of the medical testimony indicates that she is a woman, not in the sense that she gives birth, but socially and physically. She can't test out in all respects, but she is a woman.'⁹³

In Ascione's ruling, he declared that sex tests ought only to be used to detect 'fraud, ie: men masquerading as women competing against women.' This was a direct reference to the fact that the Barr Body test had been introduced by the International Olympic Committee in order to unmask what had widely been alleged to be males competing as women athletes, particularly among the teams of the Communist east. With Roy Cohn as her lawyer, and with the sports stars of the Soviet Union colouring the judgment in her favour, Richards's case can be seen in many ways as a product of the Cold War. As I have said, no-one ever actually mentioned the great nuclear stand-off in the context of Richards's case, but at the very same time as it was talking about her, the American (and British) media were also talking about another sporting, sexual, scandal which wore its Cold War colours very openly. In looking to the events of the 1976 Olympic Games in Montreal, we can, I think, better understand the ways in which the cultural context of the cold war influenced the current of sexual anxiety which shaded Richards's interactions with professional tennis.

Who Wants to Be Like Them, Anyway?

It was in the mid-1950s, during the ascendancy of Cold War paranoia, that a monstrous regiment of Soviet bloc women athletes first emerged onto the international sporting scene. Their remarkable achievements, especially in the disciplines of track and field, were greeted at first with astonishment, gradually growing into suspicion. Take for example the case of Tamara Press, the Soviet shot-putter and discus-thrower, who between 1958 and 1966, won three Olympic gold medals, four European titles, and broke sixteen world records, most of them her own. It was an extraordinary career, the previously unconquered pinnacles of which demanded some sort of

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p.268.

explanation; an explanation which common languages of sexual difference were only too able to supply.⁹⁴ For Tamara Press, like so many of her team-mates, was notoriously masculine in appearance. 'She could play tackle for the Giants,' mused *New York Times* sports writer Bob Daly, referring both to his home football team and to Tamara's six-foot-two-inches, two-hundred-plus pounds frame.⁹⁵ The gridiron became a recurring trope in American media coverage of the Soviet women. Tamara was, 'big enough to play tackle for the Chicago Bears,' wrote another journalist, Richard Daly, who, in tune with the somewhat wry tone that accompanied most reporting on the Soviet female athletes, opined that 'and at the rate the Bears are going this season, they could probably use her, too.' And not just Tamara, but her champion pentathlete sister, Irina, 'who is about the size of a running back.'⁹⁶ Again and again, Soviet-bloc women, of whom the Press sisters were infamously representative for the western press, were 'burly,' 'muscular,' 'powerful,' 'husky,' 'hefty,' – in short, masculine. Throughout the Cold War, Soviet bloc women athletes would fall prey to what Jennifer Hargreaves identifies as the central theme of women's participation in sport: 'femininity or "musculinity"?'⁹⁷ They were perceived by the western media as simply too muscular to be feminine, and so they were portrayed as masculine – hence 'musculine'. As Cahn notes, the damning image of the 'mannish' woman athlete was a function of the 'recurrence of the symbolism of gender inversion' during the Cold War years. It was a symbolism which explicitly linked gender inversion with communism. In this atmosphere, women's sports participation became not only sexually uncertain, but politically suspect, also.⁹⁸

The unprecedented dominance of women athletes from the USSR, East Germany, Poland, Bulgaria, and other communist nations provoked dark mutterings from many of their western rivals. In short, questions were raised, although never officially, about the sexual provenance of many of the Soviet bloc women athletes. Unwilling to risk any sort of diplomatic confrontations,

⁹⁴ I am grateful to Michael Rabinovich, who has provided the track and field statistics for this chapter. See: <http://trackandfield.brinkster.net> (viewed repeatedly).

⁹⁵ Bob Daly, 'US Track Team Leads in Moscow', *New York Times*, 21 July 1963, p.8.

⁹⁶ Richard Daly, 'The Red-Faced Reds', *New York Times*, 23 October 1964, p.47.

⁹⁷ Jennifer Hargreaves, *Sporting Females: Critical Issues in the History and Sociology of Women's Sports* (London, 1994), p.169.

⁹⁸ Cahn, *Coming on Strong*, pp.210-211.

the governing body of track and field, the International Amateur Athletics Federation (IAAF) resisted calls for chromosome-based sex tests until 1966, when they reluctantly sanctioned their use at the European Athletics Championships in Budapest.⁹⁹ The decision was reported in *The Times* as the 'introduction of formal medical examinations for women competitors.'¹⁰⁰ So seemingly obvious had the debate become that no-one needed to be told what the examinations would be for, nor did they need to be reminded that previous to the European Championships, women had submitted to a 'visual inspection' test in order to verify their sex. The IAAF, in short, were moving from a genital to a chromosomal definition of 'woman' in response to allegations of sexual uncertainty – much like the USTA and WTA would later attempt to do for much the same reasons. It came then as no surprise, to many western observers at least, that the Soviet Union team line-up for Budapest suddenly became shorter. 'The absence of several leading Russian women athletes, ' wrote *The Times* correspondent from Budapest, has 'caused a great deal of discussion here on the subject of physiologically "borderline cases" in women's athletics.'¹⁰¹ The 'borderline' was, of course, that between the male and female bodies. Tamara Press, Irina Press, and Tatyana Schelkanova, the defending champion in the long jump, were amongst the highest-profile names absent from the USSR team sheet. At the time, the UPI newswire service would announce that neither Press sister 'has appeared at any international event where sex tests have been applied, following protests that some female athletes are not really female.'¹⁰² The historic judgement remains the same. Semi-official Olympic historian David Wallechinsky writes in his quadrennial *Summer Olympics* almanac that the sisters 'disappeared from international competition when sex tests began.'¹⁰³ The inference is clear: they would not have passed the Barr body test. They were not women. They were men. The heated discourse that accompanied

⁹⁹ In 1992 the IAAF became the International Association of Athletics Federations, maintaining its acronym but dropping its commitment to amateur athletics, a move necessitated by the regular offering of large cash prizes to race-winners and participants on the international competitive circuit.

¹⁰⁰ Anon., 'Medical Tests for Female Athletes', *The Times*, 29 August 1966, p.3.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² UPI Syndicates, 'Tamara Press Retires as Track Competitor', *New York Times*, 5 December 1967, p.23.

¹⁰³ David Wallechinsky, *The Complete Book of the Summer Olympics* (Toronto, 2004), pp.199-200. I say 'semi-official' because whilst Wallechinsky is not employed by the IOC, they have long since ceased publication of their own rival almanac and endorsed his.

all Cold War debates ensured that, though sexually disconcerted debate focused upon the Press sisters (and curiously ignored Schelkanova, who also would never compete again), their entire team, and those of other Soviet-allied countries, was similarly tainted in the eyes of many western athletes, coaches, commentators and politicians. The willingness of 'the communists' to use 'men masquerading as women competing against men' would become symbolic of what most Americans considered to be the general immorality of the communist project.

It is a quirk of history that, with the Press sisters never actually making it to Budapest, only one woman has actually ever failed an IAAF-sanctioned Barr body test. It is a further quirk that she did so not in the Hungarian capital, where she won gold the 100 metres, silver in the 200 metres, and anchored the Polish team to victory in the 4x100m relay, but a year later at a minor track meeting in Minsk, Ukraine. Ewa Klobukowska, 'the world's outstanding woman sprinter,' it transpired, 'has one chromosome too many to qualify as a woman for international competition.'¹⁰⁴ In fact, she had more than one chromosome too many, she had several, with one cell line containing XO chromosomes, and the other containing XYY. She was precisely one of the 'mosaics' not properly covered by the Barr Body test that Renée Richards would draw attention to. However, for the Polish Klobukowska, her intersexed status was lost on some in the American media. 'When is a woman not a woman?' pondered Jane Brody, answering herself, 'When her chromosomes don't add up... The female sex is determined by the presence of two sex chromosomes known as X.'¹⁰⁵ In Brody's eyes, and those of international athletics, Klobukowska's chromosomes had failed to signify her as a woman. Brody then compounded this by noting that even though Klobukowska was a 'mosaic' she seemed physiologically to lack much in the way of female sex signs. 'Such persons appear to be sexually immature females, often tall with underdeveloped breasts,' she wrote, foreshadowing one of the major complaints about Richards. Here, Klobukowska falls into a liminal area. Brody never actually calls her a man, but effectively disqualifies her from being considered a woman. Lacking any common language of

¹⁰⁴ Anon., 'Kiev ban on top woman sprinter', *The Times*, 15 September 1967, p.1; Anon., 'Sex Test Disqualifies Athlete', *New York Times*, 16 September 1967, p.28.

¹⁰⁵ Jane Brody, 'If Her Chromosomes Add Up, a Woman is Sure to be a Woman', *New York Times*, 16 September 1967, p.28.

intersexuality or hermaphroditism, she is simply relegated to just that: not a woman. In a discourse of sexual difference that tended towards the extremely binary, such a definition would surely have been read as 'man'. Marea Hartman, the British women's track team manager, declared of Klobukowska that 'I would not want her competing against any of our girls.'¹⁰⁶ Just as the WTA would argue, it was not fair for the British women to compete against someone who was 'not a woman', that is, a man.¹⁰⁷

In the frenzied atmosphere of the Cold War, such transgressions of sexual definition inevitably took on dimensions far greater than the simple matters of winning races and breaking records. Elaine Tyler May suggests that if the Cold War was 'an ideological struggle fought on a cultural battleground', then 'American supremacy rested on... distinct gender roles for family members... a male breadwinner and a full-time female homemaker.'¹⁰⁸ This binary 'hegemonic sexual regime within the United States during the post-war years' was seen as being in direct contrast to affairs in the Soviet Union.¹⁰⁹ The American media 'viewed the appearance and situation of Soviet women as anything but feminine... "hard working women who show few of the physical charms of women in the West."¹¹⁰ It was understood, more than tacitly, that communism had resulted in the fracturing of the sexual order. The American people were required to be vigilant against both forms of moral collapse at all times. 'In the ideology of the Cold War,' summarises Kathy Peiss, 'guarding the (American) nation from communism went hand in hand with strong families, "normal" heterosexuality, and strictly separated gender roles.'¹¹¹ 'Sexual containment' within established 'straight' norms became analogous to, and a constituent of, America's foreign policy aims.¹¹² Thus the seemingly constant violation of the male/female, man/woman boundaries by Soviet bloc nations and their athletes became a recurrent motif in

¹⁰⁶ Anon., 'Polish Decision Criticised', *The Times*, 25 September 1967, p.7.

¹⁰⁷ In fact, Klobukowska later married and had children.

¹⁰⁸ Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (2nd edn., New York, 1999), p.11.

¹⁰⁹ Frank Mort, *Dangerous Sexualities: Medico-Moral Politics in England Since 1830* (2nd edn., London, 2000,) p.xxiv.

¹¹⁰ Tyler, *Homeward Bound*, p.13.

¹¹¹ Peiss (ed.), *Major Problems in the History of American Sexuality*, p.384.

¹¹² Tyler, *Homeward Bound*, pp.81-86.

efforts to, as David Harley Serlin puts it, 'exploit ideas about sexual orientation and gender identity to promote and disseminate American nationalism and domestic security.'¹¹³ Much discussion of this 'sexual containment' has focused on the 1950s and 1960s, but these motifs found some of their purest expression in the furore surrounding the women's track and field and swimming competitions at the 1976 Montreal Olympic Games.¹¹⁴ It was not, however, a simple case of Americans and Britons accusing Russians and East Germans of being 'men masquerading as women.' The 'politics of hormone doping in sport', to use John Hoberman's phrase, meant that the use of testosterone-based steroids by women athletes was also construed in ways which permitted sexual confusions and anxieties to be deployed to nationalistic ends.¹¹⁵ It had become possible to accuse 'the communists' not merely of being men in leotards, but of being women who had taken so many male hormones that they may as well be men. In both cases, it was to be the 'musculinity' of the Soviet bloc women athletes which provoked the accusations which themselves were part of a tradition of generalised American 'paranoia' about what the Soviet Union was capable of doing in order to achieve its nefarious ends. They had infiltrated the government to gain access to nuclear secrets which could unleash Armageddon. That they would overturn normal sexual hierarchies with diabolical science did not seem unlikely.¹¹⁶ The inversion, it seemed, could go either way: men who disguised themselves as women, or women who took masculinising drugs to become like men.

Even before Montreal, the US women were being portrayed by their own media as underdogs, 'overshadowed by the muscular and superbly trained Eastern Europeans.'¹¹⁷ It became a self-fulfilling prophecy, particularly in the swimming pool, where the East Germans won

¹¹³ David Harley Serlin, 'Christine Jorgensen and the Cold War Closet', *Radical History Review*, 62 (1995), p.137.

¹¹⁴ Peiss (ed.), *Major Problems in the History of American Sexuality*, p.367.

¹¹⁵ John Hoberman, *Testosterone Dreams: Rejuvenation, Aphrodisia, Doping* (Berkeley, CA., 2005), p.239.

¹¹⁶ On distrust of the Soviet Union see Paul Boyer, *By the Bomb's Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age* (Chapel Hill, NC., 1994), pp.72, 81, 101-3, 260; Frances Stonor Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters* (New York, 2001).

¹¹⁷ Robin Herman, 'US Women's Hopes Are Cast In Bronze', *New York Times*, 11 July 1976, p.176.

eleven of thirteen gold medals, to the Americans' one which, though it may have come in the final blue ribbon race, the 4x100 metres freestyle relay, was little consolation.¹¹⁸ Throughout the competition the American women swimmers themselves were often first to raise questions about their rivals. Wendy Boglioli, the American who took a bronze in the 100 metres butterfly behind the East German superstar Kornelia Ender (four golds, one silver), was particularly forthright. 'I wouldn't want to look like the East German women swimmers,' she said, 'They build them up like no women I've ever seen. They're just huge girls. I never saw women like that and I don't want to be like that.'¹¹⁹ She was also in no doubt as to how such results had been achieved, averring that 'I don't think it should come down to taking male hormones and steroids.'¹²⁰ Wendy Weinberg, bronze medalist in the 800 metres freestyle, agreed that 'they're on drugs.'¹²¹ Her teammate, and multiple silver medalist behind Ender, Shirley Babashoff, was similarly blunt. 'I wouldn't want to go around looking like a guy,' she told the *San Francisco Chronicle*.¹²² The American women's team were quoted as 'calling the East Germans everything from "bionic women" to "big guys"... they must be on drugs.'¹²³ In the track and field events, where if anything the gap between the two teams was even greater, the American coach Willye E White asked rhetorically, 'Did you see the East German who won the long jump? She had muscles and ripples all over her body. You can't get that definition just from lifting weights.'¹²⁴ As one, anonymous swimmer complained, 'who wants to be like them, anyhow?'¹²⁵

Journalists covering the competitions began to write articles suggesting that the American women would have to choose between 'femininity or prowess' and that women athletes had 'fears

¹¹⁸ The other gold medal was won by the Soviet Union as part of their clean-sweep in the 200 metres backstroke.

¹¹⁹ Quoted in Gordon S. White, 'A Woman Swimmer Returns With Medals, Bad Memories', *New York Times*, 30 July 1976, p.15

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Quoted in Neil Amdur, 'Femininity or Prowess: US women must choose', *Chicago Tribune*, 2 August 1976, p.2 (Section 6).

¹²² Quoted in Anon., 'Swimmers – Do Big Girls Have Less Fun?', *San Francisco Chronicle*, 27 July 1976, p.44.

¹²³ Neil Amdur, 'E German Women's Success Stirs US Anger', *New York Times*, 1 August 1976, p.137.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Quoted in Janice Kaplan, 'Women Athletes And Their Fears About Femininity', *New York Times*, 5 June 1977, p.S2.

about femininity' when competing.¹²⁶ It was very difficult to be both victorious in sports *and* to signify oneself successfully as a woman. This was particularly true if that failure of signification was accompanied by a suspiciously 'musculine' physiology. The losing American women cast themselves as unwilling to sacrifice their femininity, as by inference the East Germans had done, even for so great a prize as Olympic Gold. 'Many American women athletes, particularly swimmers, say that they will never adopt serious weight-training methods, that the sight of themselves with broader shoulders would create further complications in a social life already inhibited by rigid training schedules.'¹²⁷ The allusion to successful heterosexuality here was reflected elsewhere, such as in a comic article in the *San Francisco Chronicle* which awarded the 'Tin Lizzy' medals to 'those who distinguish themselves away from the victory stand', suggesting that a special mention must go to 'the social chairman of the East German delegation. Surely there must be one, a man in charge of arranging dates for the girls of the GDR who won an astounding 11 of 13 swimming medals. All of them, however, look alike – big, muscular, and hawk-faced. The man's responsibility is immense.'¹²⁸ The power of this imagery – hulking men-women unable to get dates – was such that the East German team was forced into stage-managing the very public announcement of Kornelia Ender's engagement to her teammate Roland Matthes. The American women swimmers made a conscious effort to suggest that whilst they may not have won in the pool, they were streets ahead in the femininity stakes. However, just as many would criticise the WTA members for their attitude towards Richards, so did Boglioli and Babashoff suffer a backlash against them. Journalist Joe Grege named them as the 'Ugly Americans of the '76 Games', complaining that they were 'spoilt' and 'unable to cope with the slightest hint of failure.' He admitted that their repeated loses must have been frustrating, but,

To react by questioning the womanhood of the opposition is indefensible... If the US women do not want to lift weights and enter heavy training that is their privilege. But it does not give them the right

¹²⁶ Ibid; Amdur, 'Femininity or Prowess'.

¹²⁷ Amdur, 'Femininity or Prowess'.

¹²⁸ Anon., 'Some Olympians Get Tin', *San Francisco Chronicle*, 2 August 1976, p.1 (Section 6).

to say, as Babashoff and the others have said, "I don't want to look like THAT." The sentence ends in a sneer. The image projected... is that of a muscle-bound steroid-stuffed mastodon in a one-piece swimsuit. Without doubt the East German women are big. But Babashoff at 5-10 and 160 is no nymphet, and there is not a swimmer at this level, male or female, whose shoulders are not developed beyond the rest of their physique.¹²⁹

Again, the accusations against sexually-suspect rivals left women athletes open to questions about their own femininity. After all, the American women were losing races to the East Germans not by seconds, or even tenths-of-a-second, but by hundredths. The letters page of the *New York Times*, which would excoriate the WTA, was filled with letters condemning the 'cruelty and cattiness' of the American women Olympians who were 'referring to superficial qualities of appearance, qualities found to be insufficient by thinking individuals to describe a woman.'¹³⁰ Perhaps, suggested one correspondent, 'the East German women take their skills more seriously and are capable of viewing themselves as attractive sexual women not by their measurements, but because of who they are as human beings.'¹³¹ 'There is nothing unfeminine,' wrote a third, 'in a woman wanting to be in good physical condition and enjoying competition.'¹³²

Yet critiques in the pages of liberal newspapers such as the *New York Times* and *San Francisco Chronicle* did not prevent the image of the 'musculine' East German or Soviet woman athlete becoming a popular and enduring cultural totem for the rest of the twentieth century (evinced surely by their inclusion in a 1992 episode of *The Simpsons*¹³³). Very quickly, the

¹²⁹ Joe Glegen, 'Ugly Olympians of '76 Games', *San Francisco Chronicle*, 28 July 1976, p.45.

¹³⁰ 'Mailbox: American Women, East German Women and the Olympic Spirit', *New York Times*, 8 August 1976, p.130.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

¹³² *Ibid.*

¹³³ In 'Lisa's First Word', there is a flashback to the 1984 Olympics, which were boycotted by most of the Soviet bloc. The announcer says, 'And we're seconds away from the 100-meter butterfly. While the East German, heh heh, "women", are shaving their backs three thousand miles away,

'musculinity' of the communist nations' women athletes became symbolic of the totalitarian nature of such regimes. Viewed through the lens of the Olympics, this was seen both in their training programs and in their apparent professionalism. Better training programs, argued the American (and, to a lesser extent, the British) teams and press, showed that the Russians and East Germans required state support to win medals. This 'support' quickly shaded into the dreaded 'professionalism' which was anathema in the confessedly 'amateur' arena of Olympic competition. It was the state-run training programs, particularly those involving weightlifting, which had led to the East European women's womanhood being questioned. Thus their questionable womanhood allowed critiques to be made of the Soviet systems. On a personal level, Babashoff noted that the East Germans 'never fool around and never seem to have any fun. If that's what it has to be to win, they can have it.'¹³⁴ Widening the critique, journalist Jack Anderson spoke of how 'the communists' had been 'force-training athletes for the Olympics since at least 1960. The star performers not only are subsidized, but are pampered with luxuries in flagrant violations of Olympic rules... (and) for the communist athletes, the indoctrination is as intensive as the physical training.'¹³⁵

In the western imagination, the East German and Russian women became, in their seeming lack of femininity, representative of all that was dour and joyless about communism. As swimmer Melissa Beloit said of them, 'They do not create their home atmosphere abroad. We bring our candy and things. They look around and see things that they do not know about – like hot fudge sundaes.'¹³⁶ It was a short jump in Cold War discourse from ice cream to the arms race. Writing in *The Times*, Norman Fox noted that, after their rout in the Olympic pool, 'the Americans, invariably the last to admit defeat, were talking of going back to their drawing boards because their finest product, Shirley Babashoff, has been made to look obsolete.'¹³⁷ Wendy

the Americans are heavy favorites.' Original airdate 3 December 1992, citation from <http://www.snpp.com/episodes/9F08.html> (viewed 15 January 2004).

¹³⁴ Quoted in Anon, 'Swimmers'.

¹³⁵ Jack Anderson, 'Communist Athletes', *San Francisco Chronicle*, 13 August 1976, p.39.

¹³⁶ Quoted in Norman Fox, 'A Pool Where Britain Can Only Go Panning', *The Times*, 17 July 1976, p.15.

¹³⁷ Norman Fox, 'Back to the drawing board for the US', *The Times*, 23 July 1976, p.15.

Boglioli continued the scientific theme, noting that 'their techniques are so advanced' but that 'given proper facilities we can beat them.'¹³⁸ She argued also that the communist system meant a lack of freedom for the athletes who trained within it. She said of Kornelia Ender, 'she was the best of the strong East German team, but they took her at the age of 7 to start training when they saw how she would develop into a good swimmer. They do this with athletes in all those sports.'¹³⁹ Marcia Morey, another US swimmer, agreed, saying of one East German with whom she had been pen pals, 'She has lived away from home since she was 7, and everything she does is supervised.'¹⁴⁰ This critique was seen in the pages of the British tabloids, too, with a *Daily Mirror* journalist commenting, 'Not that I would advocate going as far as the East Germans do in their quest for sporting success. Some of their poor little mites have hardly known anything in their lives except training and competing.'¹⁴¹ The key phrase is 'going as far' – it is clear that 'the communists' have transgressed some sort of line in their mechanistic, scientised approach to Olympic competition. That transgression, I think, was manifest in what was seen as the 'musculine' appearance of the East German women.

Cold War discourse became ever more explicit in discussions of the East German women's success. As Cahn notes, 'like everything from Third World governments to kitchen appliances, sport became part of a Cold War international contest in which the United States and USSR vied not only for athletic laurels but to prove the superiority of capitalism or communism.'¹⁴² The Olympics became the paradigmatic site of this war-by-proxy. Marcia Morey brought up the communist-capitalist divide when she complained that 'everything' that their East German rivals needed for training was provided by the state. Was this fair? asked her interviewer. 'Their country's goal is to have the best possible sports program,' she answered, 'and that's the way they go about it. Who's to say if its fair?'¹⁴³ Writing in reply to critics of Shirley Babashoff's 'sour-graping', Michael Levin, a professor of Philosophy at a New York University, told *New York Times*

¹³⁸ Gordon S White, 'Swimmer's Memories Not Fond', *New York Times*, 30 July 1965, p.15.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Frank Litzky, 'US Women Swimmers Are Confident', *New York Times*, 15 July 1976, p.59.

¹⁴¹ Frank McGhee, 'The Monster Lives', *Daily Mirror*, 2 August 1976, p.27.

¹⁴² Cahn, *Coming on Strong*, p130.

¹⁴³ Litzky, 'US Women Swimmers'.

readers that, 'This hardly addresses her quite sensible message. It is not conducive to humanity to live in a country where the government runs everything.'¹⁴⁴ The worry was, however, that the governments who 'ran everything' were running roughshod over the American nation. It hardly helped that Manfred Ewald, the president of the GDR Olympic committee was describing Montreal as a 'historic success for socialist countries... it proves the success of our socialist system and training methods.'¹⁴⁵ Journalist Wells Twombly made the obvious historic parallels for the *San Francisco Chronicle*. 'If you consider track and field to be on the same level as Vietnam,' he wrote, 'then it was probably just that. In events that the United States used to win just by showing up and yawning... it was a complete wipeout... (the stadium) was littered with fresh Yankee bodies. If this kept up, the image of the ugly American would fade, replaced by global sympathy for a blundering nation of losers.'¹⁴⁶ Fellow journalist Russell Davies put a more nationalistic spin on it, arguing that 'most of us probably do think that the American way, severely flawed though it may be, is superior to that of other nations. We don't need the Olympics to prove it to us.'¹⁴⁷ His defensive tone is indicative of just how shaken many Americans were by the abject defeat of the women's swimming and track teams. Yet there was comfort to be drawn from the very cause of these defeats, the communist women athletes. Their sexually uncertain appearance, and the totalitarian regimes which had engendered (or perhaps, de-gendered) them, could be soothingly perceived as the 'high cost of gold', which Americans were not willing to pay. The Cold War political value of recognizably heterosexual and feminine female bodies to American nationalism ought not to be underestimated. As Joanne Meyerowitz notes, by the 1950s, 'the female body as sexual symbol (had) permeated American popular culture' through its unprecedented representation as non-pornographic 'cheesecake' in hundreds of mass-produced

¹⁴⁴ 'Mailbox: American Way Means Winning Isn't Everything', *New York Times*, 1 August 1976, p.136.

¹⁴⁵ Quoted in Ellen Lenz, 'Germans: "Socialist Victory"', *New York Times*, 4 August 1976, p.21. Later, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Ewald would be successfully prosecuted for his role in the East German government's widespread sports doping program. See Steven Ungerleider, *Faust's Gold: Inside the East German Doping Machine* (New York, NY., 2001).

¹⁴⁶ Wells Twombly, 'Olympics: US's lesson in humility', *San Francisco Chronicle*, 25 July 1976, p.2 (Section C).

¹⁴⁷ Russell Davies, 'The Olympics Revisited: Perfection and Crybabies', *New York Times*, 29 August 1976, p.142.

magazines and calendars.¹⁴⁸ Anything that might undermine or make ambiguous these wholesome-yet-sexy images would very well be seen as un-American, unpatriotic, immoral. In their defeat at the hands of 'the communists', the Americans could seek solace in the belief that they had not betrayed their country by betraying their sex.

The Twenty-Third Best Female Player in the World, or Whatever

The parallels between events at the Montreal Olympics and the Renée Richards affair are illuminating. In spite of a central difference – Richards freely admitted to having once been a man, whilst the East Germans were accused of *becoming* men due to doping – both hit at the central question of how to define 'woman' for the purposes of sporting competitions. The 'red scare' that accompanied the 'big guys' accusations in Montreal permits us some insight into what questions of sexual difference might have meant in the context of Cold War America. Sexual uncertainty evidently produced an anxious reaction in both the American team and (most of) the media who followed them: what else would communism stoop to if it would not respect the sacred boundaries of femininity? The sexual anxiety surrounding Kornelia Ender and her East German teammates reflected the sexual anxiety surrounding Renée Richards: the definitions of 'woman' were being exposed as less than absolute. The WTA and the USTA were forced to alter their definitions from the genital to the chromosomal, despite the question mark that such a shift necessarily leaves over genitals as sex signs. Was a vagina no longer a signifier of 'woman'? The American Olympic swimming team, knowing that their rivals had passed chromosome tests, switched instead to very secondary sex signs such as muscles and shoulder build, again begging questions: did XY no longer signify? The manner in which the American media tended to bind up their team's (mostly) unambiguous womanhood with the virtues of capitalism and the American way suggests a direct link between knowing what it meant to be an American and knowing what it meant to be a woman. In the Cold War American popular imagination, anything which undermined the latter, such as Renée Richards's demand to play in the US Open, seemed also to undermine the former.

¹⁴⁸ Joanne Meyerowitz, 'Women, Cheesecake, and Borderline Material', *Journal of Women's History* 8.3 (1996), p.10.

But for a time, thanks to Justice Ascione, the consequences of Richards' demand would have to be accepted. The media furore began to die down somewhat, especially once she had lost to Virginia Wade in the first round of the US Open. The *San Francisco Chronicle* called it a 'successful loss' on the grounds that 'if she had won the controversy would have gone on *ad nauseum* and transsexuals would have continued to appear in headlines as if they were circus oddities.'¹⁴⁹ Yet by the end of the decade it was becoming increasingly apparent that the real difference between Richards and the other women on the tour was not her height, her muscles or her weight, but her age. At forty-six years of age by the beginning of the 1980 season, she simply could no longer keep up with the younger generation of players, such as Tracy Austin and Hana Mandlikova. She had made her point, she said, and she had enjoyed herself, but laden with considerable debts, she intended to return to medicine – where she could make far more money than from a string of second-round exits in minor tournaments.

Yet Richards did not immediately make the quiet return to Ophthalmology that the WTA were perhaps hoping she might. Instead she became coach to another of the young tennis stars, Martina Navratilova. At the time, Navratilova was considered the most naturally talented player on the tour, but one who lacked the mental concentration and tactics to win constantly. In her autobiography, Navratilova directly credits Richards with the turnaround which would see her become, arguably, the greatest women's player of all time.¹⁵⁰ Mulling on the Richards affair itself, Navratilova writes that,

If the real experts said she was a woman, I figured, let her play.
Besides, I took one look at her warming up one day and knew she
wasn't going to dominate women's tennis... I also couldn't envision a

¹⁴⁹ Editorial, 'A Successful Loss', *San Francisco Chronicle*, 3 September 1977, p.6.

¹⁵⁰ Martina Navratilova with George Vecsey, *Martina*, (New York, NY., 1985), p.225.

wave of men having that operation just so they could become the twenty-third best female player in the world or whatever.¹⁵¹

The irony is that it was Richards, and the other members of 'Team Navratilova' (Navratilova's travelling group of coaches, trainers, girlfriends, and advisors) who, as Johnette Howard notes, encouraged Navratilova to embrace new levels of physicality and training regimens, 'which are now commonplace' for women athletes.¹⁵² The physical strength which the WTA and others had seemed to fear in Richards eventually became in Navratilova a new standard for other women to achieve, rather than disparage as masculine.¹⁵³ By the middle of the 1990s, some sort of accommodation seemed to have been reached with the physically-powerful woman athlete. As Cahn suggests, physical prowess was permitted, as long as it was accompanied by an attendant level of feminisation, even sexualisation; be it Florence Griffith-Joyner's long, painted fingernails, or Serena Williams's skin-tight lycra tennis dresses.¹⁵⁴ Still, the very fact of this accommodation, with its requirements of various gendered sex signs (fashion, jewellery, sexual allure), suggests that the anxiety over women's participation in sport – and anxiety which Renée Richards brought into stark relief – has not disappeared.

The sporting sexual anxieties of 1976-7 show us how fluid definitions of sex have to be in order to respond to the needs of those doing the defining. Yet they also show us how that very fluidity – personified in the transsexual body of Renée Richards – can sometimes work against those who would make sexual definitions. In shifting the sexual goalposts, to mix a sporting metaphor, the authorities who sought to use only chromosomes to signify 'woman' unintentionally both a) undermined the authority of other sex signs which they had previously used, namely genitals, and b) demonstrated that the very 'fact' by which they wished to define 'woman' was a construction of their own choosing. If the WTA and USTA could *choose* what signified woman,

¹⁵¹ Ibid., p.223.

¹⁵² Howard, *The Rivals*, p.6.

¹⁵³ Of course, Navratilova was criticised in some quarters for being 'too muscular' and 'unbeatable', but as Howard notes, this eventually became admiration, and then emulation. See *The Rivals*, pp.190-251.

¹⁵⁴ Cahn, *Coming on Strong*, p.246-279.

then it rather meant that 'woman' could mean whatever anyone with enough influence to enforce a definition wanted it to. The social construction of sex itself was made apparent. The wider cultural meanings of those constructions became apparent at the Montreal Olympics when American sportswomen and commentators moved seamlessly from the sexual ambivalence of their communist opponents to the immorality of the communist regimes. Renée Richards may well have just been happy with 'my Ferrari, my beautiful apartment, and my tennis club,' but she – and the rest of the world – got a media circus in which the anxieties of women's participation in sport were played out.¹⁵⁵ As a transsexual, Renée Richards embodied the seemingly dangerous possibilities of sexual transgression and uncertainty inherent in women's sport. In becoming the locus around which various concerned parties addressed Cahn's question 'does sport make women more manlike?', Richards's exposed the ways in which sex signs could be arranged to suit those who sought to define sexual difference. In short, she showed the social construction of sex.

¹⁵⁵ Richards, *Second Serve*, p. 325.

Conclusion: Sex, Signed

Sexual difference has always been to some degree socially constructed, but in the second half of the twentieth century the 'transsexual phenomenon' revealed the mechanics of that construction more clearly than at any other time in history. Whether or not the emergence of transsexuality as a physical possibility was caused by advances in medical technologies¹, or whether it was brought about by the intellectual separation of biological and psychological sex², the existence of individuals who sought to, and did, change their sex fortified the notion that the categories of 'man' and 'woman' were convenient cultural fictions whose seemingly pre-discursive 'truth' was sustained by the deployment of a variety of historically contingent 'sex signs'. Transsexuality is concerned with the successful redeployment of those sex signs. It is the process by which an individual who believes that 'I am a woman trapped in a man's body' is able to convince others that this is really the case.

This dissertation began with Toril Moi's assertion that it would be 'useful' to see if it were possible to understand transsexuality without reliance upon the concepts of sex and gender.³ It should be clear by now that transsexuality, and anything its study enables us to say about sexual difference, cannot be understood without the concepts of sex and gender. Transsexuality is dependent upon a common language in which the individual is able to say 'I am of the masculine gender, but my body is of the female sex, therefore my body must be made to change'. There exists no other way of stating the transsexual condition. The conflict between biological sex and psychological/social gender *is* the transsexual condition. However, it should also be clear by now that we do not necessarily need to establish any sort of hierarchical relationship between biological sex and gender when it comes to the signification of 'woman' and 'man'. In closely studying several transsexual autobiographies, I have shown how rather than biology dictating

¹ See: Bernice L. Hausman, *Changing Sex: Transsexualism, Technology, and the Idea of Gender* (Durham, NC., 1995).

² See: Joanne Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States* (Cambridge, MA., 2002).

³ Toril Moi, *What is a Woman? And Other Essays* (Oxford, 1999), p.115.

gender, or gender dictating biology, the intimation of sexual difference is achieved in a variety of different ways. In the autobiographies, transsexuals recalled how they redeployed sex signs strategically, depending upon time, place, and audience. Numerous combinations of both biological and social/gender sex signs could be used. These were contingent upon whom the transsexual was trying to denote 'man' or 'woman' to, and for what purpose. In Chapter One, for example, I showed how although the penis was considered to be the chief sex sign for 'man', it was not always a socially appropriate sign to deploy. Similarly, in Chapter Two I explored the ways in which the breasts could be usefully deployed as a sex sign for 'woman', and also how the acceptability of that deployment changed over the second half of the twentieth century. Simply having a penis could not always signify 'man', especially as the penis was hidden from view. Breasts, too, could fail to signify 'woman' if they were too small, or if they were bound and flattened out of sight.

In Chapter Three I explored the ways in which the physical ability to have heterosexual intercourse had to be coupled with a convincing display of the masculine and feminine gender traits which mirrored the 'male' activity and 'female' passivity of penetrative 'straight' sex. These masculine and feminine gender traits were the most common, most everyday ways in which transsexuals showed themselves to be their true sex. In Chapter Four, I demonstrated the ways in which such gender traits were often seen as stereotypical and damaging, but how they also endured to continue successfully signifying 'man' and 'woman' throughout the second half of the twentieth century. The final two chapters, case studies of April Ashley and Renée Richards, served to show how all these sex signs – biological and gendered – were brought together by transsexuals in order to claim their true sex in the face of often hostile audiences. Both Richards and Ashley altered the signs they used, depending upon the audiences they faced, and the purposes for which they wished to be recognised as women.

What we have seen in all six chapters are the ways in which a fluency in the common language of sexual difference – a mastery of sex signs – was crucial to the successful

connotation of the transsexual as a man or a woman. Much of this mastery was made possible by advances in medical technology, most particularly plastic surgery and hormone therapies. Yet the limitations of such technologies could hamper as well as help in the signification of sex; plastic surgeons have been able to create a convincing, functioning vagina in a chromosomally male body since the 1940s, but they remain unable to create a penis that the FTM transsexual can use both for urination and for penetrative sex. Chromosomes cannot be changed at all, and as both April Ashley and Renée Richards found out, the common languages of sexual difference also permitted some of their audiences to believe that XY chromosomes signified 'man' no matter how phenotypically female and socially feminine one was. Some of the technologies used by transsexuals were not used exclusively by them; the anabolic steroids beloved of bodybuilders were also taken by FTM transsexuals, whilst the depilatory creams and laser hair-removal techniques used by MTF transsexuals were originally the provinces of 'born' women seeking to live up to western ideals of the hairlessness and youth. In many ways, transsexuals were involved in the same acts of sex signification as 'non-transsexuals', for both groups were trying to speak a common language of sexual difference.

What has also been apparent is the ways in which that common language of sex difference altered over the course of the second half of the twentieth century in Britain and the United States of America, and the ways in which transsexuals have adapted to those changes. The biggest changes arguably took place in the realm of gendered sex signs. Whilst in the final analysis the presence of a penis invariably signified 'man' in 1950 and in 2000, the same was not necessarily true of an interest in car mechanics, a competitive personality, or even an attraction to women. The impact of second-wave feminism and the sexual revolution in the 1960s and 1970s altered forever the ways in which many Britons and Americans would answer the question, 'What is a woman?' and its corollary, 'What is a man?' The once reliable answers, which divided the sexes up along correspondingly gendered lines, were no longer politically acceptable to increasing numbers of people as an awareness of the dangers of gender stereotyping spread. And yet, as we saw in Chapter Four in the analysis of Jan Morris's *Conundrum* (1974) and Deirdre

McCloskey's *Crossing* (1999), it sometimes seemed as though some transsexuals were embracing those stereotypes as wholeheartedly as feminists were casting them off. Some feminist critiques of transsexuality focused upon its apparent gender essentialisms; that a traditional, passive femininity was the 'reality' of womanhood. Yet it has been a key point of this dissertation that it was not necessarily the transsexuals themselves who were sexist, but rather the languages of sexual difference available to them. The point has not been made in order to deny transsexuals agency in their choices, nor to abdicate individual responsibilities in the face of some omnipotent 'discourse', but rather to demonstrate the ways in which language – Steedman's 'assemblage of representations which define a field of knowledge'⁴ – impinged upon those choices and responsibilities.

Similarly, the literary form available to transsexuals for telling their stories also delimited the ways in which they were able to express themselves. Whilst transsexuality is founded in the conflict between sex and gender, that conflict had to be expressed as autobiography in order for it to be resolved.⁵ To gain access to the medical technologies which aided the indication of the 'man' or 'woman' that their gender already seemed to signify, transsexuals had to present a particular life story to their physicians: 'I was born in the wrong body'. The published autobiographies which have formed the main source base of this dissertation are the resolutions of that consulting room story: 'This is how I got the right body.' In transsexual autobiography we see explicitly – materially, even, in surgeries and hormone therapies – the retrospective self-fashioning that is central to the broader autobiographical genre. The genre insists on a sort of completeness, an 'end' to the story: 'And here I am, the woman I always knew myself to be.' Yet by taking several transsexual autobiographies together and analysing them historically, we can see the ways in which that 'end' was contingent upon a variety of malleable sex signs being successfully deployed to a variety of audiences. The construction inherent in autobiography further intensified the construction inherent in sexual difference.

⁴ Carolyn K. Steedman, 'Linguistic Encounters of the Fourth Kind', *Journal of Victorian Culture* 1.1 (1996), p.55.

⁵ See: Jay Prosser, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality* (New York, NY., 1998).

Numerous historical contexts influenced the story of transsexuality, and thus the story of sexual difference. For example, the Cold War (in the United States) and the 'permissive society' (in Britain) have both featured prominently in this dissertation, and there is no doubt that these giant 'backdrops' had an impact upon the ways in which transsexuals were able to make use of the sex signs they required. Cold War fears about Soviet communism mixed with older concerns about women's participation in sport to partially undermine the effectiveness of Renée Richards's campaign to play professional tennis. A tabloid culture which fed off scandal ensured that April Ashley was often forced to rely upon the more salacious elements of her life in order to make her claims to womanhood. Yet the desire to 'change sex' clearly goes back much further than social upheavals of the post-World War II years. From Tiresias of Greek myth and the Berdache of the Native Americans through to the much-parodied 'ladyboys' of modern Thailand and the 'drag kings' of San Francisco, for as long as there have been boundaries between 'man' and 'woman' there have always been people who crossed that boundary, or who blurred it.⁶ Such transgressions, or 'inversions', have usually – though not always – resulted in condemnation, opprobrium, and even death for those who have committed them, or have been accused of committing them.⁷ In this sense, there is not all that much that is 'new' about transsexuality in the second half of the twentieth century. It can be placed, quite comfortably, into the long historical narrative of 'transgender'; of those who have blurred and broken the boundaries between men and women.

What was unique about transsexuality as it occurred in the second half of the twentieth century, what constituted the 'transsexual phenomenon', was the medical ability to change an individual's biological sex at their request. Genitals, breasts, body hair, musculature; all could be altered to signify the opposite sex. The change could not be made total (chromosomes and bone structure remained stubbornly unreceptive), but it was a distinct break with the sex changes that

⁶ See: Leslie Feinberg, *Transgender Warriors: Making History From Joan of Arc to Dennis Rodman* (Boston, MA., 1996).

⁷ See: Joan Scott, 'Gender and the Politics of History' in id., *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York, NY., 1988), pp.28-52.

had gone before. Above all, transsexuality is a form of transgender which has ever been reliant upon the medical profession. It is plastic surgeons, endocrinologists, gender therapists, and psychiatrists who literally enable the transsexual transformations from male to female bodies and vice versa. The concerns of medical science constituted another set of limitations upon the ways in which transsexuals were able to use the languages of sexual difference in order to express themselves. Many critics, particularly feminists, have seen these medical 'gatekeepers' as the guardians not merely of transformative technologies, but of old-fashioned, sexist, even, conceptions of sex and gender difference. Judith Butler, in particular, has noted the transsexual's dilemma in wishing both a) to access the sex-change technologies and b) not to embrace stereotypes. She has posited a response to this dilemma in which the traditional, physician-pleasing transsexual autobiography is a strategic gambit which can safely be abandoned as soon as the change is achieved.⁸ This is a daring proposition, but it is also a historically naïve one. Transsexual autobiographies, indeed transsexual lives as we have seen them throughout this dissertation, have *always* been about coping strategies, about the changing tactics transsexuals employed in order to successfully show themselves to the world as men and women. The transsexual strategy tended to be one of adaptation, if not to changing gender conventions, then to the concerns and interests of their audiences. The sex signs used by transsexuals were always contingent upon the individuals and social groups they were trying to signify themselves to.

These groups – the law, professional organisations, and medicine itself – all had differing demands as to the ways in which sex be signified. Thus transsexuals could successfully portray their sex to those who demanded genital and phenotypic sex change, such as the tabloid press or modelling agencies, but could fail to signify their sex to audiences who demanded chromosomal sex change, such as sports federations, and some law courts. For a transsexual to successfully signify sex was for them to 'pass'; the key to success in the transsexual's new life.⁹ The place of transsexual autobiography in a transsexual's attempt to 'pass' can then seem somewhat

⁸ See: Judith Butler, 'Undiagnosing Gender' in id., *Undoing Gender* (London, 2004), pp. 75-101.

⁹ See: Sandy Stone, 'The *Empire* Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto', in Julie Epstein & Kristina Straub (eds), *Body Guards: The Cultural Politics of Gender Ambiguity* (New York, NY., 1991), pp.280-304.

ambiguous. How does an individual pass as a woman, when the front cover of her autobiography presents the subtitle, 'my journey from boyhood to womanhood'? On the one hand, the autobiographies are a litany of convincing reasons why the writer 'really is' a woman (or a man) despite initially appearing otherwise. Yet on the other hand, the autobiography necessarily reveals the author as a transsexual, as a surgically- and chemically-enabled woman (or man), which would seem to undermine their ability to pass. This, however, is to assume that it is only transsexual men and women whose sex is constructed. Transsexuals throughout the second half of the twentieth century were trying to speak the same language of sexual difference as everyone else. 'Born' men and women learnt (consciously and unconsciously) to signify sex in just the same ways as transsexual men and women did. 'Born' men and women made strategic use of a variety of sex signs, both biological and social, in order to signify themselves convincingly as their assigned sex. Some 'born' women had breast implants, shaved their legs, plucked their eyebrows, dieted. Some 'born' men worked out at the gym, cultivated designer stubble, took Viagra. Of course, 'born' men and women did not need to have genitals surgically constructed for them, but the mere possession of a penis or a vagina does not signify 'man' or 'woman'; the sign only signifies something when it is read. The penis only takes on the meaning of 'man' within a common language of sexual difference which authorises that belief. 'Having' a vagina does not, on this score, imply any more 'truth' to one's sexual status than 'getting' a vagina. What counts is whether or not it is believed to mean a particular thing. 'Born' men's and women's signification of sex was just as much of a social construct as transsexual men's and women's was. The only difference was that transsexuals, particularly those who published autobiographies, tended to be more conscious, more aware of that construction: 'We do it for a living.'¹⁰

The categories of 'man' and 'woman' are, as I said in my Introduction, made up. Transsexuality in the second half of the twentieth century affords us the clearest view of these constructions, how they are sustained, and how they change over time whilst insisting on their own apparent ahistoricity. In this dissertation I have sought to abandon a hierarchical relationship

¹⁰ Deirdre McCloskey, *Crossing: A Memoir* (Chicago, IL., 1999), p.xv.

between sex and gender, suggesting instead that they are merely ways of defining particular signifiers within the larger group of sex signs. If we are able to see sex and gender as the same sorts of things, then we are able to view their hierarchised arrangements as just that: arrangements. Whether one viewed sex as pre-empting gender, or gender as defining sex, *both sex and gender* served to signify an individual as a man or a woman. Too often has transsexuality merely been viewed as a process by which the biological sex is made as congruent as is medically possible with the psychological gender of the individual. What is forgotten, and what I have focused upon in this dissertation, is that this congruence is itself aimed at a further goal: the successful signification of 'man' or 'woman' within particular socio-cultural environments. Gender sustains sex, sex sustains gender, and both support the edifice of sexual difference.

In the second half of the twentieth century, Britain and the United States underwent massive social upheavals. Transsexuality was merely a very small part of those seismic changes in the cultural landscape. For the vast majority of people, transsexuality never impinged upon their lives. For most, transsexuality lived itself out in the tabloid newspapers, the sports pages, in sensationalist novels, and on the silver screen. But the issues that transsexuality necessarily raised were present in everyone's lives: whether one was accepted as a man or a woman dictated the way one was treated, the jobs one could take, the interests one was expected to have, the people one was presumed to be attracted to. Transsexuality affords us insight into this most basic category of human organisation: man or a woman? It tells us how those categories were sustained throughout the turbulent second half of the twentieth century. In studying autobiographies in particular, I have been able to show the very personal, human ways in which this categorisation impinged upon people's lives. Above all, this dissertation has been about individuals – April, Renée, Deirdre, Mario, Raymond, Caroline, Jan, Leslie, Paul, Aleshia, Julia, and all the others – and their struggles to speak a language of sexual difference intelligible to those around them. It is only because of their rather brave decision to live their lives by their own lights that we are afforded these insights into the constructions of sexual difference. Of course, such insights were hardly their intention; a dissertation was likely the last thing on their minds as

they were prepped for surgery. Yet if transsexuality aims for passing, then the transsexual autobiographers in this dissertation surely pass as historical subjects; exposed to the same analytical tools that we would use on any other social group. Their statements, their claims to truth, have been questioned, contextualised, and parsed in just the same way as anyone else's would have been. The transsexual wish to pass as a man or a woman has, I think, been granted here in my treatment of them as methodologically no different from any other historical group. What that treatment, that analysis has shown us is that whilst language of course places limits upon the ways in which an individual is able to signify themselves to others, it is also in a constant state of flux and that any signification that occurs is not necessarily permanent or absolute. The transsexuals in this dissertation started their lives by unintentionally signifying 'man' or 'woman' to the world. Yet by coming to be as fluent as was possible in the language of sexual difference, they were able to signify identities with which they were more comfortable, namely 'woman' and 'man'. In my Introduction, I quoted Luce Irigaray suggesting in the 1980s that a re-think of sexual difference could be the salvation of the age.¹¹ As I said, I have not saved anyone with this dissertation, but I believe that I have shown how we can think about sexual difference in such a way as to prevent it from being a permanent, natural state over which we have never had any control. We can all speak the language of sexual difference. We just need to think it through.

¹¹ Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* (trans. Carolyn Burke & Gillian C. Gill, Ithaca, NY., 1993, orig. 1984), p.5.

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