

Virginia Prince and the Hazards of Noticing

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The Fresh Prince of Gender

The Stonewall Reader, edited by Jason Baumann (as a project for the New York Public Library, probably with the intent of being used as a course text for classes like the "Queer Literatures and Media" class at San Francisco State University for which I am writing this¹) features an autobiographical vignette by Virginia Prince. The obligatory about-the-author blurb before the piece reads:

Virginia Prince was a pioneering transgender activist who published the magazine *Transvestia*. In this essay for the magazine, she recounts her personal journey with her gender identity and how it affected her intimate relationships.

Having a passing familiarity with Prince's work, I think the reference to "gender identity" here is anachronistic—and it's an anachronism that seems representative of a distortion propagated by contemporary LGBTQIA+ ideology.² I fear that readers born in the 21st century, whose political consciousness did not intersect the era before "Trans Women Are Women" was a pillar of progressive dogma, are liable to interpret Prince through the lens of a modern ontology that fits neither reality, nor how people at the time thought about the events Prince describes. The revolution establishes a new language, which makes it impossible to represent what even its own founders were actually saying.

Specifically, the language—the *ideology* of "gender identity" casts "gender" as a psychological property known to the individual by introspection, with the implication that everyone has a gender identity in the same sense. The GLAAD Media Reference Guide³ makes this laudably explicit: "Everyone has a gender identity," it claims, defining *cisgender* as characterizing "a person whose gender identity is aligned with the sex they were assigned at birth". The implied ontology seems to be one in which the main (or possibly only) psychological difference between women and men is a gender identity "switch" in the brain of which it is of the utmost importance to honor and respect but which doesn't otherwise have any particular properties. This is not a trivial claim that can be asserted by definition!

But if we aren't committed to believing in a gender identity "switch" in the brain, we're left with a lot of questions that our Society's pro-LGBTQIA+ political faction has an incentive to not answer, or even allow to be asked—but whose implied answers undergird what the movement is even trying to do. If Virginia Prince was not a "woman trapped in a man's body", what was she?

Well, she told us. Prince a.k.a. Arnold Lowman's claim to fame—the reason she's a historical figure worth excerpting in *The Stonewall Reader*—is as the founder of the Society for the Second Self, or Tri-Ess, a support organization for heterosexual crossdressers. (Thus the title of the magazine *Transvestia*.) Tri-Ess specifically excluded homosexuals, and Prince was vocally critical of sex reassignment surgery. This viewpoint, in which straight men who wish they were women are a sexual minority with their own interests, but distinct from gay men who sometimes perform in drag, and certainly distinct from actual women, seems to be in the minority today.⁴ I'm concerned that this distinction will be lost on students in the current year doing a superficial reading of *The Stonewall Reader* for a gen-ed classes under the gender studies department at their R2 university. On the superficial reading, Prince simply *was* a woman who happened to be trans, and now we know that it was wrong of our ancestors to have not accepted and celebrated this.

¹Books that people read for themselves (rather than to pass a required class to get their degree) don't usually brand themselves as "readers."

²Some may question the use of the word "ideology" here: being gay or trans isn't an *ideology*, the objection goes. Indeed. But what people who can say the term "LGBTQIA+" out loud with a straight face have in common, is.

³<https://glaad.org/reference/trans-terms/>

⁴As evidenced by how *gauche* the phrase "actual woman" sounds to the modern ear. Everyone knows what it means, but only a curmudgeon like me *talks* like that (and even I know how to code-switch).

But the counterevidence to this view is right there in the text! From the piece excerpted in *The Stonewall Reader*:

I had imagined that being rather shy with the girls I had created a "girl" for myself using my own body and therefore, since I was now going to have a real girl all my own, I would have no need of such artificiality. Many of those who will read this will recognize the feeling and also the error of it.

In other autobiographical work, Prince was more explicit (emphasis mine):

Starting at the age of about twelve I found myself fascinated with wearing my mother's clothes on all occasions when the family would be out. *It was sexually exciting and thrilling* but it was also frightening and it gave rise to a tremendous load of guilt and shame. [...] I went through adolescence with those worries, and I kept on dressing on every occasion when I thought I could do so safely. *While it started out as an erotic experience each time*, there came a time when, after eroticism had run its course, I discovered that there was still a very special pleasure in "being" a "girl". Instead of just being an erotically aroused male in a dress, I found that I was somehow different. I did not know for years what was going on—or more properly what was coming out. It was that part of myself that had been hidden and suppressed in all my growing years—just as it is in all men. It was my other half, that half that when openly expressed is termed feminine.⁵

If you pay attention to what people say online when normies aren't looking, it turns out that this is a pretty common self-report among non-exclusively-androphilic trans women: acknowledging an erotic dimension to cross-gender fantasies, but minimizing it in favor of a theory of suppressed femininity.

I don't buy it. That is, I believe that people are telling the truth about their subjective experiences, particularly since I have a similar story to tell,⁶ but I think it's possible for people to be mistaken about the *causes* of their experiences⁷. When Prince writes about the error of imagining that getting married would cure his⁸ transvestism, that doesn't mean that suppressed femininity is a better casual explanation for what was going on with him than the "inverted" (onto the self) heterosexuality of (in his own words!) "I had created a 'girl' for myself using my own body". An alternative hypothesis is that inverted heterosexuality doesn't un-invert itself just because an actual woman is available.

Transgender Is Not One Thing, and Queerness as a Political Religion

The above reading of Prince is situated in the context of the two type theory of male-to-female transsexualism, most famously advocated by Ray Blanchard, J. Michael Bailey, and Anne Lawrence.⁹ The idea is basically that there are two classes of reasons why males seek sex reassignment, differentiated by sexual orientation and age of onset: an early-onset/homosexual type characterized by lifelong sex-atypical behavior (in a way that's apparent to others and often causes difficulties with social integration), and a late-onset type coincident with the kind of inverted heterosexuality that Prince wrote about, which Blanchard called *autogynephilic* ("love of oneself as a woman"), which Lawrence characterizes as "men who love women and want to become what they love."¹⁰ (It doesn't have to be two ontologically strictly distinct types for the model to be useful.)¹¹

Some might question whether it makes sense to impose this kind of theoretical interpretation on non-consenting subjects, but the scientific measure of a psychological theory must be based on how well it predicts the data we observe, not about what's most popular. Some queer theorists disdain sexological research for fear of the "map"

⁵In Vern Bullough (ed), *The Frontiers of Sex Research*, quoted in Zagria Cowan, "Virginia Prince (1912-2009): A conflicted life in trans activism", https://transreads.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/2024-03-12_65efd6ce5a1da_Virginia_Prince_A_conflicted_life_in_tra.pdf

⁶Zack M. Davis, "Sexual Dimorphism in Yudkowsky's Sequences, in Relation to My Gender Problems", *The Scintillating But Ultimately Untrue Thought*, 2 May 2021, <http://unremediatedgender.space/2021/May/sexual-dimorphism-in-the-sequences-in-relation-to-my-gender-problems/>

⁷Zack M. Davis, "Psychology Is About Invalidating People's Identities", *The Scintillating But Ultimately Untrue Thought*, 5 September 2016, <http://unremediatedgender.space/2016/Sep/psychology-is-about-invalidating-peoples-identities/>

⁸Earlier in this work, I've been following *The Stonewall Reader* and other sources in saying "Prince ... she", but *in the context of what this sentence is saying*, "his" seems appropriate.

⁹Anne A. Lawrence, "Autogynephilia and the Typology of Male-to-Female Transsexualism: Concepts and Controversies", *European Psychologist*, 23 March 2017

¹⁰Anne A. Lawrence, "Becoming What We Love: Autogynephilic Transsexualism Conceptualized as an Expression of Romantic Love", *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine*, August 2007.

¹¹Zack M. Davis, "The Two-Type Taxonomy Is a Useful Approximation for a More Detailed Causal Model", *The Scintillating But Ultimately Untrue Thought*, 8 July 2022, <http://unremediatedgender.space/2022/Jul/the-two-type-taxonomy-is-a-useful-approximation-for-a-more-detailed-causal-model/>

being used to covertly reshape the “territory”, but the striking thing about the sexologist’s worldview is how much of it is an elaboration of things “people already know”, what it explains about the distribution of human behavior we see independently of whether anyone believes it or not.

The two-type typology casts the early-onset type of MtF transsexualism¹² as the extreme right tail of feminine gay men, which might seem presumptuous to queer theorists who hold as an axiom that gender identity and sexual orientation are independent, or that the association between homosexuality and sex-atypical (the queer theorists would say “gender coded”) behavior. But notwithstanding that “gender identity” and sexual orientation are conceptually distinguishable, *no one* actually thinks these things are probabilistically independent.

Research such as that by Richard A. Lippa aiming to operationalize and quantify the extent to which lesbians are more masculine (male-typical) than straight women and gay men are more feminine (female-typical) than straight men¹³ is reflecting the same empirical reality that we also see depicted in queer media as a matter of course without special remark. In Jamie Cortez’s *Gordo*, it’s tacitly understood (both by readers, and characters in the book) that the little boy who is regarded as a sissy by others is, with high probability, “pre-gay”, even if he hasn’t gone through puberty and has yet to experience any overtly sexual feelings.

By summarizing the structure that already exists in the real world, psychological theory lets us make rich predictions about the world depicted in a text in ways that would be hard to recover if one were just limited to the text and somehow forbidden from making inferences from what we know about the real world which ultimately generated the text.

Reading Harvey Fierstein’s *Torch Song Trilogy* in light of the two-type taxonomy, it’s striking how vividly the protagonist Arnold clearly belongs to the early-onset taxon, even if it’s hard to precisely articulate the full *je ne sais quoi*. (See the Appendix to this paper on the nature of categorization. Crucially, a small effect size along many different dimensions can be aggregated into a large effect size.¹⁴ For example, people are very good at telling apart female and male faces, but it’s a lot harder to tease out exactly which features are being used to discriminate, there’s no single easily describable feature shared by all men’s faces and no women’s faces.¹⁵)

The characteristically feminine way in which Arnold pines after Ed marks him as “cut from a different cloth” as people like Virginia Prince (or, um, the present author) in a way that transcends which of us identify as “trans women” or (straight or gay) men. Similarly, given Ed’s relationships with women, he seems likely to be gynandromorphophilic (GAMP)¹⁶ rather than gay, which puts his relationship with Arnold in a different light.

Given these stark empirical realities, the cultural concept of “trans” as a single category that “carves reality at the joints” (and even more so, queer or LGBTQIA+) seems fraught, and more of a historical artifact of how various political fights have played out in Anglophone culture. (Most of the trans women in western countries in the late-onset/autogynephilic taxon; they’re not really the equivalent of, say, the Samoan *fa’afafine*,¹⁷ who are the early-onset taxon. Lesbians and gay men and AGP men largely have different interests and live different lives and don’t naturally congregate, except insofar as “queerness” in the West has become its own pseudo-ethnicity or political religion, as a cultural phenomenon distinct from the underlying neurotype-demographics.

The motivation for the phrase “political religion” is that, as the dominance of religious authorities has waned by the late 20th and early 21st centuries, political commitments seem to have taken on a socio-psychological role similar to that of religion in previous Societies. For example, polling shows that people are increasingly unwilling to date those who belong to a different political party¹⁸ (analogously to how interfaith marriages were anomalous in a previous era). It’s not (just) that people are naturally queer and naturally find that the LGBTQ community represents their interests. The causality goes the other way, too: people get socialized (e.g., in internet subculture or gender studies classes taught at state universities) into queer culture and identify with a righteous struggle against normality, as expressed in Marsha Shelley’s “Gay Is Good” (emphasis mine):

And you straights—look down the street, at the person whose sex is not readily apparent. Are you

¹²On the FtM side, it’s clear that there’s an early-onset taxon (of behaviorally masculine gynephilic females), but the science is less settled on what’s going on with non-exclusively-gynephilic trans men; some authors (e.g., Phil Ily, in his 2023 *Autoheterosexual: Attracted to Being the Other Sex*) contend that there’s an analogous two-type taxonomy with an autoandrophilic type. The present work focuses on the MtF as a matter of the present author’s subject matter expertise.

¹³Richard A. Lippa, “Gender-Related Traits in Gay Men, Lesbian Women, and Heterosexual Men and Women: The Virtual Identity of Homosexual-Heterosexual Diagnosticity and Gender Diagnosticity”, *Journal of Personality*, October 2000.

¹⁴Zack M. Davis, “The Univariate Fallacy”, *Less Wrong*, 15 June 2019, <https://www.lesswrong.com/posts/cu7YY7WdgJBs3DpmJ/the-univariate-fallacy>

¹⁵Vikki Bruce *et al.*, “Sex Discrimination: How Do We Tell the Difference Between Male and Female Faces?”, *Perception*, 1993.

¹⁶Rosenthal, Hsu, and Bailey, “Who Are Gynandromorphophilic Men? An Internet Survey of Men with Sexual Interest in Transgender Women”, *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, November 2017.

¹⁷Kay Brown, “Coming of (r)age in Samoa...”, *On the Science of Changing Sex*, 20 June 2017, <https://sillyolme.wordpress.com/2017/06/20/coming-of-rage-in-samoa/>

¹⁸“Politics are Increasingly a Dating Dealbreaker—Especially for Women”, *Changing America*, <https://thehill.com/changing-america/enrichment/arts-culture/3917348-politics-are-increasingly-a-dating-dealbreaker-especially-for-women/>

uneasy? Or are you made more uneasy by the stereotype gay, the flaming faggot or diesel dyke? Or most uneasy by the friend you thought was straight—and isn't? *We want you to be uneasy*, be a little less comfortable in your straight roles. And to make you uneasy, we behave outrageously—even though we pay a heavy price for it—and our outrageous behavior comes out of our rage.

But crucially, the political religion is not necessarily in its neurotype-demographic members' interests! For example, a lot of autogynephilic men are probably better off not transitioning given the inadequacies of current technology. A lot of “pre-gay” children in the current year¹⁹ are getting socialized as trans, which is not obviously in their long-term interests. The oppositional and defiant aspects of LGBT culture as articulated by *e.g.* Shelley are a choice; people who have the same underlying neurotype need not embrace smashing the heteropatriarchy. (It's plausible people of the same neurotype in the past were disproportionately monks and nuns, holding respected places within Society's power structure despite not being part of a standard reproductive unit.)

Appendix: On Gender and the Nature of Categories

A professor at San Francisco State University recently told me that she had never had a math major in one of her gender studies classes. Apart from finding this unlikely,²⁰ this “blackpill”²¹ me on the discipline, because I think a basic grounding in probability is absolutely necessary to understand gender in Society. Nothing advanced—there's no particular need to, *e.g.*, be able to prove the central limit theorem (that density function of the sum of independent continuous random variables converges specifically to $\int_{-\infty}^{\infty} \frac{1}{\sqrt{2\pi\sigma^2}} \exp(\frac{(x-\mu)^2}{2\sigma^2})$). But the general ideas of what is a distribution, Bayesian updating as normative reasoning (that one's beliefs about hypothesis H should be updated upon encountering evidence E according to $\frac{P(E|H)P(H)}{P(E)} = \frac{P(E|H)P(H)}{P(E|H)P(H)+P(E|\neg H)P(\neg H)}$), conditional independence, *ℰc.* are critical to making sense of what's going on when people talk about gender in Society. A discipline that can't assume the basics of epistemology (on the grounds of “That's not my department”) will surely fail at grasping the truth of its subject matter.

The reason probability is essential to the study of gender and Society is because most claims about gender are correctly understood as probabilistic in nature, because all categories are probabilistic in nature: the cognitive function of categorization—what it even means to say that “an X is a Y ” for nouns X and Y —is to assign category-membership to an entity on the basis of observing some of its features, and then use category-membership to make predictions about features that we haven't observed. This procedure works for generating useful predictions when there exists an appropriate conditional independence structure among the features of the entities assigned to a category, *i.e.*, when $P(\text{feature}_1 \ \& \ \text{feature}_2) \not\approx P(\text{feature}_1)P(\text{feature}_2)$, but $P(\text{feature}_1 \ \& \ \text{feature}_2 | \text{category}) \approx P(\text{feature}_1 | \text{category})P(\text{feature}_2 | \text{category})$.²²

The upshot for gender studies is that when defenders of traditional gender roles advocate for sexist social institutions, progressives cannot trivially rebut them by pointing out that what type of genitals or sex chromosomes a person has clearly isn't relevant to how they should be treated, because even if chromosomes *per se* are irrelevant, chromosomes are causally upstream of all other traits of a person.²³ It would be like claiming that the number of times the Earth has gone around the sun is irrelevant to how a person should be treated. Notwithstanding the various caveats one could make about some children being mature, some adults being immature, cross-cultural variation in coming-of-age rituals and social roles, *ℰc.*, the reason Society distinguishes between adults and children is not because of an arbitrary obsession with astronomy.

¹⁹Or even children who aren't in the early-onset taxon at all, as the present author speculates in Zack M. Davis, “If Clarity Seems Like Death to Them”, §“A Private Document About a Disturbing Hypothesis (early 2020)”, *The Scintillating But Ultimately Untrue Thought*, 30 December 2023, <http://unremediatedgender.space/2023/Dec/if-clarity-seems-like-death-to-them/#a-private-document-about-a-disturbing-hypothesis-early-2020>

²⁰STEM students still need gen-ed credits to graduate; you'd expect them to be represented in all courses without necessarily making their specialization known to the instructor.

²¹That is, to accept a hopeless situation. <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Blackpill>

²²Zack M. Davis, “Where to Draw the Boundaries?”, *Less Wrong*, 13 April 2019, <https://www.lesswrong.com/posts/esRZaPXSHgWzyB2NL/where-to-draw-the-boundaries>

²³Zack M. Davis, “Blood Is Thicker Than Water”, *Less Wrong*, 27 September 2021, <https://www.lesswrong.com/posts/vhp2sW6iBhNJwqcwP/blood-is-thicker-than-water>