



ARCHETYPAL TRANSSEXUALITY

by Rachel Pollack

The San Rafael Hospital in Trinidad, Colorado has become a kind of shrine for transsexual people in America. Even for those who did not get surgery from Dr. Stanley Biber, his clinic in San Rafael has become synonymous with "sex reassignment surgery" in the same way that the entire nation of Denmark came to symbolize "sex changes" in the 1950s and 1960s, after Christine Jorgensen stepped out of Copenhagen and into the world.

A small hill rises behind the hospital, and on top of it, surrounded by trees and flowers, stands a genuine shrine, a small structure dedicated to the Virgin Mary. Behind a conventional statue of Mary, with room for candles and other offerings, the building houses a more precious sculpture of the Christian Goddess. According to the plaque at the front of the shrine, a Trinidad man was caught in a blizzard and in danger of being blown away when he came upon the statue of Mary and clung to it until the fury of nature broke open and he could find his way to help and recovery. The sanctuary



he created looks over Dr. Biber's clinic, gently blessing all the trans-formed women and men who pass through its doors.

Now, Mary occupies an interesting place in the history of mythology. Many people know that while the Christian Church attempted to portray God as entirely male, the ordinary people clung to Mother Mary as the giver of hope, mercy, and nurturance. Less known is the fact that the early Church consciously adapted aspects of various Pagan Goddesses to create Mary's image and place her in the hearts of the people. Two Goddesses in particular contributed to Mary: Aphrodite, who rose from the sea, and Cybele, a Goddess from Asia Minor who earlier had made a triumphant entry into Rome as the Great Mother of the Gods.

I have written elsewhere of Aphrodite as a transsexual Goddess. Her story tells us how the Sky God, Ouranos, was oppressing Gaia, the Earth, until Gaia gave a sickle (a women's harvest tool shaped like the crescent Moon) to her son Kronos. Kronos cut off his father's genitals and threw them into the sea. Ouranos does not die in the story, but withdraws into the shadows, the same way the male persona of many transsexual women will withdraw once the female reality has given itself permission to emerge. The



severed genitals, however, do not sink out of sight. Instead, they stir up a great foam on the waters. Out of this foam, golden Aphrodite, the embodiment of femininity in all its grace and power, emerges into the world.

And Cybele -- when the Great Mother came to Rome she brought with her her Gallae. The Gallae were anatomical males who, in the midst of ecstatic group frenzy, used stone sickles to sever their own genitals, which they then flung through open doorways. The families who received the bloody relics considered them a blessing. In return for Cybele's grace, a family would tend to the bleeding Galla and nurse her back to health, at which time she ceremoniously received women's clothing and entered into the service of her Goddess.



The presence of Mary overlooking the San Rafael clinic, and in particular her mysterious emergence out of a storm, forms part of a great web of images and history. The web includes all the mythological figures who change sex or cross genders. It includes the real life Gallae and Hijras and others who alter their bodies as well as the tribal shamans who move into the roles of the "opposite" sex, usually not as a matter of conscious choice, but because the spirits demand it of them. It includes the Stone Age evidence of androgynous Goddesses and cross-sexed priests and priestesses alongside the increasing numbers of contemporary transsexuals who have begun to understand that, as Davina Anne Gabriel puts it, we cannot comprehend transsexuality without some notion of "transcendence," or, as Dallas Denny says, more bluntly, "Transsexuality is a religious experience."

To recognize our place in that web means, paradoxically, to step out of a trap. This is the trap in which we experience transsexuality as a sickness, or even just a psychological condition. For transsexual people, such an ideology (and that is what it is) has become more and more of a dead end -- literally, with so many people losing their lives to depression, suicide, bad drugs, unsafe sex and all the other miseries that allow the purveyors of pathology to say "There? You see? If it wasn't a sickness, wouldn't they all be happy?"

Even those of us who insist that transsexual people are not "sick" will still talk about "healing," whether we think we need to heal from shame, or society's oppression, or unhappy childhoods. But as long as we speak of healing we stay within the world

of sickness. In the United States we consider happiness the basic human condition, and any suffering as some sort of aberration. I would argue that transsexuality arises from a passion so powerful that it transcends issues of happiness. The word *passion* originally meant suffering, not pleasure. The suffering of transsexuality, however, is like that of religious ecstasy, or even orgasm -- overwhelming, intense, and ultimately joyous when we surrender to it and let it carry us into the power of the experience.

Think where transsexual desire leads us. We give up our positions in society (I am not talking here about the slide downwards in status for male-to-females, but much more basically of our very places in the world, a loss that applies to transsexual men as well as to women, even if the men eventually go up in status). We risk losing our family and friends. We face ridicule and sometimes extreme violence, even death. We take powerful and dangerous drugs to alter the very shape of our bodies. And finally, we undergo -- we seek out, even demand -- surgery on our genitals. No logical decision, or confusion, or social conditioning, or even mental illness, can account for such an overwhelming need.

Recently, a number of transsexual and transgender people have suggested that people seek surgery because of pressure from the medical profession, which convinces them that surgery will allow them to become normal members of society. I cannot believe this. I have met too many transsexuals who know very clearly that surgery is exactly and precisely what they want, and that the doctors are not their masters but their instruments.

To describe transsexual people as dupes of the medical profession, or slaves to social conditioning, or trapped in rigid ideas about gender roles, is precisely to take away our power, a power so intense that it terrifies people. Sometimes we can see the question in their faces. "What would make someone do -- or want to do -- such a thing?" And because the dual acts of changing gender and altering the body frighten them they try to think of an explanation. "He must hate himself so much." "She can't accept the role society has given her." "Her parents must have abused her." Each of these statements, and all the others, assume that the transsexual man or woman doesn't really know what he or she is doing. And more, they shift the focus from transsexuality itself to some external concept or ideology. All explanations, even friendly ones, drain away the passion of the experience.

It is time to realize that changing gender and altering the body are not the same thing. While many people cannot imagine a gender change without surgery, many others find surgery totally unnecessary. And many people who have surgery will say clearly that it is not the surgeon's knife that makes them men or women, that surgery only changes the outer form to match their inner feelings. The confusion of surgery with gender identity leads many people to think of postoperative transsexual people as superior to preops or to people who change gender without caring

about surgery at all. This hierarchy is unfortunate, because it sets people against each other when there is no need for that. At the same time, it also takes away the mystery of surgery itself. Once again, it "explains" surgery as a way just to prove something, or to join an elite. But genital surgery is too strong an experience to dismiss in this way.

Gender identity is a matter of self-knowledge, but also of social functioning. We inhabit our gender and exhibit it to the world. Genital surgery is not really a social experience at all. Obviously, it becomes important in intimate sexual relationships.

It may also give us more confidence, as well as legal status. Ultimately, however, surgery is private. It forms a mystery of the body. It may have more in common with religious body altering, such as ritual scarring, than with changing gender. (It is important to remember, however, that transsexual people not only

desire surgery but go to great lengths to get it. This makes the experience radically different from any body altering imposed unwillingly on people, such as clitoridectomy performed on pre-adolescent girls, or even the surgery done on intersex babies.)

There is a verse in the *Tao Te Ching*, the ancient Chinese teaching on "the Way", that speaks directly to some of these issues. In the translation of Gia-fu Feng by Jane English it reads as follows:

"Knowing ignorance is strength.

Ignoring knowledge is sickness.

If one is sick of sickness, then one is not sick.

The sage is not sick because he is sick of sickness.

Therefore he is not sick."

Whenever we try to find the *cause* of our transsexuality we become weak. This is because we deny its reality within our selves and try to find some explanation outside of us. Some sickness or conditioning. If we know and accept that we are ignorant of what makes us transsexual, and that we should not waste our energy trying to pinpoint some external cause, then "knowing ignorance" will indeed become a source of strength.

But if we cannot know what causes transsexuality, we can know a great deal about it. We can acknowledge its power and its reality, we can learn about other transsexual people and their experiences, and we can discover its ancient worldwide history. To ignore all this knowledge certainly weakens us and makes us sick.

To overcome the pathology that our culture attaches to transsexuality we need, above all, to want to overcome it. To finally and utterly reject it. To become sick of sickness. At the moment that we do this, that we become sick of sickness, we begin to escape it, and the deeper we go in that direction, the greater our liberation.

Carl Jung once remarked that the ancients had gods, we have complexes. The Galla may have experienced feelings and desires similar to those of modern transsexual women. After all, since no one chose them to be Gallae, they must have felt the same

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overwhelming push to present themselves. But instead of seeing themselves as compelled by a sickness, they believed their Goddess had called them into Her service. Both viewpoints require a surrender, but when we surrender to a Goddess we join ourselves to her power and her beauty. When we surrender to a sickness we get nothing but shame.

Here are two more aspects of that web of images. In Greece, the main God who ruled over transgendered activities was Dionysus. His male followers would dress as women, his female followers would strap on large phalluses. He himself was depicted as a stick decorated with a dress and a beard. Some of the



more patriarchal Greek writers described him as "effeminate" or "womanly." Indeed, his myth tells us that he was raised as a girl, and even when he came into his Godhood he

often wore feminine clothes and kept his hair long and flowing, something only women were supposed to do.

The psychologist Ginette Paris tells us an interesting story about Dionysus. Raised as a girl, he went mad in adolescence. Paris tells us that we do not know the cause of his madness. Certainly some of the readers of this magazine might make a guess. Insane, Dionysus wanders the world until he comes to Phrygia, the home not only of Cybele and the Gallae, but according to some accounts, Aphrodite. Cybele initiates him, Paris tells us, and restores his sanity. Paris says we do not know how Cybele heals him. Did she initiate him back into his femaleness? Did she lead the God to embrace the doubleness of gender? After he returned from his wanderings, Dionysus became the God of ecstasy, leading men but especially women out of the traps laid for them by a rigid polarized society.



The second myth does not invoke transgendered or transsexual issues quite so directly. However, it involves someone clinging to a statue for deliverance from an emotional storm, and thus it returns us to the presence of Mary overlooking and blessing Dr. Biber's clinic. The Greek Orestes went mad -- madness again -- after Apollo ordered him to kill his mother as punishment for her crime of murdering her husband. Though the Goddess Athena absolved him he still had to pay a penance to the Goddess Artemis (Orestes's mother had killed her husband because he had sacrificed their daughter to Artemis in the hope of gaining the Goddess's favor -- the story of Orestes involves generations of murder and abuse). Thus Orestes wandered the world carrying a statue of Artemis. Finally, he felt the insanity leave him, and he dared to put it down. He set it in a riverbed and walked away. Two Spartans passed by. When they saw the statue staring at them, horribly, from the water, they went mad.

Now, Spartans were known for being ultra-masculine, while Orestes, despite his defense of his father, was considered -- like Dionysus -- effeminate. Thus, the rigidly male Spartans cannot believe the sudden emergence of the dark feminine. But there are more direct connections to our own stories. Artemis was often linked with Cybele. The most famous statue of Artemis stood not in Greece but in Ephesus, a town in Asia Minor, the home territory of Cybele. The Phrygians themselves described Artemis as another name for Cybele.

The Ephesus statue showed the Goddess's torso covered in small globes. Most modern writers assume these are extra breasts, showing her power as the Great Mother. Recently, however, a British archaeologist pointed out that the globes have no nipples. The archaeologist suggested they might have represented the testicles sacrificed by Artemis/Cybele's gallae worshippers.



Classical Greek Artemis was not a mother Goddess but a virgin. We might describe her as forming a link between transsexual women and lesbians (or between the two sides of a transsexual lesbian). Goddess of the Moon, Artemis lived in the mountains apart from the male dominated civilization. She refused all contact with men, spending her time with her band of nymphs. A lover, as well as hunter, of animals, she also watched over women in childbirth. In short, she is almost the model of a back to the land radical lesbian. And yet, as Cybele, she also is the Goddess who accepts the Gallae into her service.

And a final link -- the early Christian council which established Mary as officially the Mother of God took place in Ephesus, the site of that famous statue, once considered one of the seven wonders of the world. And so we come full circle, to Mary, and to Cybele/Artemis, and to statues.

Writing about the story of Orestes, the statue of Artemis, and the two Spartans, Roberto Calasso states "Such is the power of the image; it heals only those who know what it is. For all others, it is an illness." Transsexuality comes to us with all the power of a divine force who will not be denied. If we recognize it and accept it as a true vision of the self from the deepest part of the psyche, if we carry the Goddess with us until we find ourselves strong enough to set her self from the deepest part of the psyche, if we carry the Goddess with us until we find ourselves strong enough to set her down, then we may find it opens us to a life of spirituality and joy. If we try to deny it, or belittle it, or explain it away, it can destroy us. Knowing ignorance is strength. Ignoring knowledge is sickness.

If one is sick of sickness, then one is not sick.

