

Reflections

Egg Hatching; Or, Letting the Eighteenth Century Be Trans

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Abstract

For the past several decades, scholars have examined the queer identities and sexual practices in eighteenth-century materials. However, queer and non-normative gender has been less frequently researched, even within the body of scholarship devoted to queer eighteenth-century studies. Scholars often take at face value the period's gender norms, thereby suppressing the fact of a transgender eighteenth century. In this essay, I offer examples, from the Chevalier d'Eon to Lord Byron, that foreground the transgender qualities present in many materials of that time. I call on scholars to recognize the ways our field has inherited the period's own normative views on queer gender expressions.

“Realness” is a pathway to survival.—Janet Mock¹

My joys, my griefs, my passions, and my powers,
Made me a stranger.—Lord Byron²

I often wish I had chosen to study something other than trans femininity. Transgender eighteenth-century studies has presented me with numerous opportunities, and I have been warmly received by colleagues, it's true, but I often struggle to shake the feeling that the materials I read are somehow violent toward me as a trans woman. I read an eighteenth-century novel that mocks a woman for having facial hair and I see myself. I read a piece of scholarship that asserts a historical figure was simply too *competent* to be transgender and I see myself. I read a monograph that fundamentally understands women as small

¹ Janet Mock, *Redefining Realness: My Path to Womanhood, Identity, Love & So Much More* (New York: Atria, 2014), 116.

² Lord Byron, *Manfred, A Dramatic Poem* (London: John Murray, 1817), lines 55–56.

and high-voiced and be-wombed and I do not see myself. It hurts every time. It would have been easier to study Augustan meter, I think. But I persist. The field can be made better, of that I am sure.

I've been giving a lot of thought to what makes a piece of media *feel* transgender. Much of my scholarship is based on feeling, which I think is a particularly eighteenth-century way of reading. Regardless of whether we identify them as transgender, the lives and works of people like Princess Seraphina, the Chevalier d'Eon, and Lord Byron somehow feel transgender, as though their texts carry a faint residual handprint that I can place my own hand alongside and marvel at the similarities. And when I explain this sensation to people, even to cis people, they tend to be receptive even if they cannot quite grasp the feeling for themselves. So, what is it that makes these texts feel transgender? How can something *feel* trans without *being* trans?

Part of the answer, I think, lies in what I call *chirality*. In chemistry, chirality refers to molecules that are mirror images of each other but “flipped” so that they cannot be superimposed no matter how one rotates either of the molecules. My own understanding of this idea mostly comes from the television program *Breaking Bad*, of all places (an interest in STEM is a trans feminine stereotype that I do not at all conform to, I'm afraid). In one episode of the show, we see main character Walter White explaining the concept to his high school chemistry class, raising both hands to show that his left and his right are mirrored but opposite, which Walt outwardly connects to thalidomide—a chemical that can alleviate morning sickness in one configuration and cause birth defects in another—and inwardly connects to methamphetamine.³ The show uses chirality as a metaphor to understand Walter as a two-faced character fundamentally at odds with himself: the chipper chemistry teacher down the street and the ruthless meth cook and murderer. Two beings with the same image used to wildly different results.

As it turns out, the literature of the eighteenth century also displays this metaphorical quality. For d'Eon this is essentially the governing literary device that animates her memoir; she is the diplomat and the spy, the staunch imperialist and the radical feminist, the “bad boy” and the “good girl.”⁴ D'Eon uses this technique to great effect, allowing her readers to

³ “Cat's in the Bag ...,” *Breaking Bad* (2008).

⁴ Charles d'Eon de Beaumont, *The Maiden of Tonnerre: The Vicissitudes of the Chevalier and the Chevalière d'Eon*, translated by Roland A. Champagne, Nina Ekstein, and Gary Kates (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).

reconcile their otherwise conflicting images of d'Eon the Dragoon and d'Eon the Maiden, for her gender encompassed both. To underscore this *chirality*, d'Eon reached to other such contradictory women who were well-known to European reading audiences: Joan of Arc, Hannah Snell, and her own personal rival Mme de Pompadour. These references worked well in part because eighteenth-century Europe was so heavily invested in what it meant to be human in all its messiness. How was it that a thinking, reasoning human came to be? Are the person I am in public and the person I am in my thoughts the same person? Europe was embroiled in philosophical debates about dualism and imagination and observation; they debated fiercely the difference nature and nurture had on an individual, and they wondered whether humans could be effectively raised in a manner contradictory to their seemingly innate impulses—that is, could a sweet and gentle girl be raised to become a decorated combat veteran and illustrious state diplomat?

The literary landscape of eighteenth-century Britain underscores these questions. The public had become hungry for a new-to-them literary form that displayed characters who had complex inner lives, who used competing public and private spaces—houses with private closets or busy parties full of masked attendees, for example—to further their own lives or understand virtue or play out a philosophical experiment. I'm talking, of course, about the novel. This is important because to a degree it primed people to narrate their own internal realities in a way that was novel-like. When we think of that all-important transgender literary form, memoir, we must inevitably think of this development in the history of literature and thought. The fundamental *chirality* of humanity that draws us to memoir as a form—the recognition that the internal or private self is not quite the same as the public self, that the memoir can *reveal* things about a person—is in part a function of this novel-hungry culture.

So, back to the “feeling trans” thing. If eighteenth-century literature carries a sense of chirality in general, what makes transness so special? I find myself drawn to a kind of heightened chirality, beyond what I might ordinarily find in narrations of the self. Eighteenth-century literature that “feels trans” does so, I think, because its underlying chirality threatens a kind of crisis. That is, the question of selfhood that runs through so much eighteenth-century work becomes particularly unstable—not in the sense of mental illness, mind you, but structurally, narratively, a kind of change feels imminent. We might think of this as a literary “egginess,” reflecting that state of being so many trans people are familiar with in which

the pre-transition self struggles greatly against the unconscious reality of one's own transness. Gulliver's morose assertion that Yahoos should all be castrated is an example of this kind of unstable chirality; his dueling self-images of a Houyhnhnm-like rational being and a bestial Yahoo-esque creature are not capable of being held in a psychological stasis. This same feeling animates a great deal of literature of the period: *Manfred's* titular character feels it when he compares Astarte's "uncharnelled" spirit to his own "sepulchral" body, d'Eon feels it when she muses on her "bad boy to good girl" trajectory, D'Elmont feels it when the visceral feminine excess of Ciamara's private chambers become too much to look at. In all of these moments, a kind of change—a transition, if you will—feels imminent even if the realities of eighteenth-century life often prevented it.

This sensation can be applied to a lot of literature of the period. Does Pamela "feel" trans when her internal virtue is threatened by her role as Mr B's preyed-upon servant? Maybe. As tired as the "lens" metaphor has become in literary studies, I believe this is how transness functions as an analytical lens. And it is here that we have to recognize that the eighteenth century is a particularly transgender time period. If we follow the logic of scholars like Thomas Laqueur and Dror Wahrman in their—oft challenged, admittedly—assertions that the period saw a monumental shift in how sex and gender were conceived, then it stands to reason that many people in the eighteenth century suddenly found themselves at odds with the normative expectations of the culture around them. How does one navigate a society that expects gender to be firmly moored in biological "realities" that are themselves too dynamic and unstable to be moored *in*? This is a question that runs through how much of the literature of the period feels. The eighteenth century is transgender at its very core.

It matters because, as I asserted in the opening of this essay, eighteenth-century studies does not have to hurt. We can *choose* to question the assumptions of sex and gender that the eighteenth century made natural for us, and we can choose not to reinscribe its normativity. Feeling the latent transness in the eighteenth century is a way of recognizing the painful chirality of ourselves as eighteenth-century scholars: self-proclaimed disinterested observers of a time centuries past and also subjects of that time's own oppressions. We can reconcile our two selves. We can let ourselves be real.

