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## CHANGING SEX AND BENDING GENDER: AN INTRODUCTION

Alison Shaw

An Indian folk-tale tells the story of two Rajas who agree that if one of them has a son and the other a daughter, their children will marry. When they both have daughters, one Raja disguises his daughter as a boy and raises her as his son. This does not solve the problem of her biological sex, however, and at her marriage the deceit is discovered and the boy's father declares revenge. Desperate, the girl attempts suicide by throwing herself into the river Juma, but instead emerges from it transformed into a male. Her grateful father builds temples on the river bank in gratitude (Penzer 1927: 229–230). In this story, gender is manipulated through disguise and a sex change is effected by supernatural means, for it would have been impossible to achieve, at that time and place, through human efforts alone. In many other myths and legends, a transformation of biological sex is itself the source of the changed person's supernatural powers. For example, the Greek myth of Kaineus tells the story of a young, vulnerable woman who is miraculously transformed into an aggressive and superhuman warrior king. In one version, the transformation of Kainis-the-girl to Kaineus-the-man seems to be a form of revenge, for it occurs after Kainis has been raped by Poseidon, while in another version her sex change happens in time for her to outwit the sea god and avoid the rape (Forbes-Irving 1990: 155–62).

Stories of 'changing sex and bending gender' in folk tales and ancient mythology can thus be regarded as representations of the power of human imagination, as fantastic transformations that could not possibly happen in real life (Forbes-Irving 1990, Warner 2002). In fact, however, the anthropological record shows that changes of sex and transformations of gender occur in a wide range of social contexts and have probably taken place in all known human societies. These changes and transformations take a variety of different forms, ranging from the temporary or intermittent donning of an alternative gender identity, such as in instances of cross-dressing in the theatre, to permanent transformations of biological sex, such as those resulting from modern medical gender reassignment surgery. As we shall see, while some forms of sex change and gender transformation

are voluntary, others are enforced, and although some are relatively informal, others are quite elaborately institutionalised. The case studies in this book explore some of these possibilities for changing sex and bending gender. This introduction offers an overview of the forms that sex change and gender transformation have taken, thus providing a context in which the individual contributions to this volume can be considered.

Alterations and transformations of sex and gender occur, by definition, at the boundaries of what a society defines as male or female, boy or girl, and man or woman, usually according to a dual system of classification. For this reason they constitute implicit challenges to conventional sex and gender classifications. Sex changes and gender transformations are often associated with supernatural power, with magic and with danger *precisely* because they occur at boundaries and thus challenge conventional categorisations (Douglas 1966). As we shall see, changes to conventional allocations to sex and gender categories are in some contexts condemned outright as unnatural, while in others they are associated with extraordinary spiritual powers, echoing the magical features of sex change and gender transformation found in folk-tale and myth. They may also be viewed simultaneously as a source of spiritual power and a danger to established conventions and, as such, as phenomena to be contained and controlled and sometimes exploited.

A society's responses to sex change and gender transformation reflects the ways in which it perceives and maintains sex and gender distinctions, including whether two or more sex and gender categories are recognised and what is regarded as 'possible, proper and perverse' in gender-linked behaviour (Ramet 1996: 2). To focus on situations of ambiguous or changed sex and on transformed gender roles and categories, as we do in this book, can illuminate cultural perceptions of what constitute 'normal' sex differences and appropriate expressions of gender, and therefore enrich our insights into different symbolic and social constructions of gender. First, however, some definitions of terms are in order: what do we mean by 'sex' and 'gender'?

## Defining sex and gender

The comparative and ethnographic literature is fraught with problems of definition, not least because the relationship between 'sex' and 'gender', and thus between what it means to be male or female, a boy or girl, a man or woman, varies in different cultural contexts. Moreover, some scholars use the term gender synonymously with sex, or else in a way that includes biological sex in order to emphasise that sex too is socially perceived (Kessler and McKenna 1978). However, for the purposes of this introduction, it seems crucial to be able to distinguish the social status of persons as women or men, or occupying alternative or intermediate genders, and their anatomical or genetic status. The term 'sex', as I use it here, refers to the biological characteristics located in anatomical features and physiological processes that people use, in ways that are socially and cultur-

ally mediated and not always dichotomous or fixed, to define maleness or femaleness. In this usage, 'sex' is analytically distinguishable from both 'sexuality', which refers to sexual desire and behaviour, and 'gender'. I use 'gender', a term derived from the Latin 'genus' meaning 'kind', 'sort' or 'class', to refer to social categorisations of persons, usually as women or men, boys or girls, in ways that encompass at least some distinct patterns of social and cultural difference and often draw on perceptions of sex (Roscoe 1994: 341). Gender classification is usually dichotomous, but 'third gender' traditions (Herdt 1994) have also been identified, as I discuss below. Sex and gender are not always either mutually exclusive or corresponding categories because ideas about the nature and significance of anatomical and physiological sex differences vary and can influence the rigidity or flexibility of gender categories and, conversely, the social significance of gender in any given context may in turn influence the ways in which biological differences are perceived.

In Western discourses of sex and gender, gender is usually regarded as grounded in, or as an elaboration of, the 'objective reality' of 'natural facts' of sex difference as these are located in anatomy and physiology. Further, sex differences are usually perceived dichotomously as 'male' and 'female'. In this view, nature gives us two sexes and it follows logically that there are therefore two genders. This view of dichotomous sex difference as a natural given is so deeply rooted in Western discourses that it can bias practical research into the nature of variation in human physiology or behaviour. The routine dividing of research subjects into male and female categories, for example, can prejudice the results of research by positing a sex-typed difference at the outset (Kessler and McKenna 1978: 72, Devor 1989: 1–3). The choice of descriptive terminology in research reporting sex differences frequently reflects prior assumptions about the nature of men and women in society, revealing more about gender than about sex (Martin 1991) while negative evidence of sex difference is frequently unreported (Fausto-Sterling 1985). In fact, careful scrutiny of the Western scientific evidence on sex differences suggests that what makes a person male or female, thus determining their biological sex, and what is involved in the construction of gender, in becoming a (culturally defined) boy or girl, man or a woman, is a complex interplay of genetic instruction, hormones, culture and socialisation. Towards understanding these processes, 'the biological sciences, at best, provide only strong suggestions about why human females and males act the way they do' because 'human sex differences can only be described in terms of averages, tendencies and percentages, rather than clear-cut absolutes' (Devor 1989: 1).

People in other societies do not necessarily give the same degree of salience to biological difference in their understandings of gender as it is accorded in the West and gender may be, in comparison, relatively independent of biology. In fact, Western understandings of anatomical sex have not been historically consistent, but have changed over time in ways that reflect historical, political and social concerns. Laqueur (1990) argues that the Western 'two sex model' of male and female as incommensurably separate, and a consequence of natural differ-

ences grounded in the body, has in fact dominated only since the Enlightenment. For thousands of years previously a 'one sex model' of the genitals prevailed and male and female bodies were seen as mutable, the boundaries between them being 'of degree and not of kind' (Laqueur 1990: 25). Laqueur argues that although gender was an important marker of social status and cultural role before the rise of science and the social and political transformations of the late eighteenth century onwards, it was nevertheless regarded as logically prior to and thus independent of bodily sex.

Human understandings of the body, bodily substance and procreative processes define 'male' and 'female' in socially and culturally specific ways. One example, offered here as illustration, shows how sexual difference may be a matter of degree, or of the relative strength of male and female substances that all bodies contain. The Hua people of the New Guinea highlands, like most other peoples, assign an infant to the male or female sex on the basis of genital configuration at birth. However, a person can become 'more' male or 'more' female according to how much contact they have with female bodily substances. Men absorb female substances by eating food prepared by reproductively active women, through sexual intercourse with women and through casual contact (Meigs 1990). In this example, the substance determining maleness is fluid and sex is thus seen as mutable. Elsewhere, sex differences may be seen as fixed but may still be treated as independent of gender to a significant degree, as we shall see below from examples of females and males in long-term gender-transformed roles.

Some societies have acknowledged that there may be more than two sexes, by recognising an additional sex, or sexes, that combine the features of the other two, and to which persons of ambiguous sex or who have some of the characteristics of both sexes may belong. 'Third sex' categories, as I show in Chapter 2, may also be culturally elaborated as alternative or 'third' genders to which persons who are unambiguously male or female may also choose to belong. The remaining sections of this introduction describe the main forms that sex changes and gender transformations have taken, noting some of their functions and limits. For heuristic purposes, three broad categories can be identified: alterations to the physical body; long-term gender transformations without corresponding sex changes; and, thirdly, temporary or short-term manipulations of gender identity, although, as we shall see, there is often some overlap between these categories.

## **Changing bodily sex**

Alterations to the physical body that can result in a new sex or gender assignation are sometimes performed as surgical procedures in response to the birth of infants with ambiguous genitalia, as I show in Chapter 2. Births of infants with genitalia that cannot be defined as clearly male or female from external observation have occurred in all human societies and are more common than is generally known, probably accounting for almost 2 percent of all live births (Fausto-Sterling 2000:

51). These 'intersex' conditions show that the attributes of biological sex, such as chromosome configuration, internal reproductive structure, external genital morphology and hormonal functions, exist as a continuum of variation, rather than as two discrete categories, but from a social viewpoint they make sex assignment problematic, at birth, in childhood or in later life.

In Chapter 2, I outline some of the cultural responses to this ambiguity. Between the most extreme cultural reactions of horror or of reverence, infants with ambiguous genitalia may also be raised gender-ambiguously, in ways that enable some individuals to become men, others to become women, and yet others to remain ambiguously gendered as adults, as they choose. Thus, infants born with ambiguous genitalia and reared with an ambiguous or, as yet, undetermined gender identity do not, *necessarily*, suffer socially or psychologically in later life, as is assumed in the dominant Western biomedical approach to intersex births. Even so, since the twentieth century the predominant Western medical assumption that unambiguous sex assignment at birth, *combined with* sex-appropriate gender socialisation and sex-appropriate hormonal changes at puberty, is critical for the formation of gender identity has justified many surgical and medical 'corrections' of genital ambiguity in infants.

Another challenge to the dominant biomedical approach to the formation of gender identity comes from people with unambiguous genitalia who grow up identifying strongly with the sex *opposite* to that which they were assigned at birth on the basis of their genital appearance. In some cultures, individuals may identify with at least some characteristics of the 'opposite' sex in a number of culturally recognised ways, including as members of alternative or third gender categories. In contemporary Europe and the United States, some individuals choose to alter their anatomical sex by surgical and hormonal means, not in order to participate in alternative or third gender categories but to achieve physical conformity with the gender with which they identify psychologically.

The term 'transsexual' usually defines both the pre- and post-operative state of individuals who feel they were born mistakenly into the body of the 'wrong' sex, and who therefore present 'a formidable challenge to the assumption that sex-based biological factors determine gender' (Devor 1989: 20).<sup>1</sup> Until recently, in Western Europe and the United States, transsexuals could opt only for surgery and hormonal treatment or for being identified as transvestites or 'cross-dressers' (persons whose gender and sex correspond, but who temporarily dress and act to correspond with the opposite sex and gender). However, recent trans-genderist movements, which seek to challenge the rigidity of the two-gender culture of Western societies, may have made it easier for some individuals to live as 'trans-gendered' persons without opting for surgery or being categorised as transvestites. Nevertheless, many transsexuals do opt for medical treatment and surgery, 'taking whatever steps they can to alter their sexual status to conform to their gender' (Devor 1989: 20 and 1997).

'Corrective' surgery, however, does not necessarily remove all of the discordance that transsexuals experience between their sex and their gender identity. As

Dembour demonstrates in Chapter 3, the remaining inconsistencies lie within society rather than in biology. The post-operative transsexual's sexual morphology may now be regarded as consistent with their gender identity but remain at odds with their sex as assigned and legally registered at birth. Dembour presents poignant cases that illustrate the far-reaching implications of this discontinuity. Dembour's examination of the slowness of the European Court of Human Rights in responding to individual suffering caused by this discontinuity suggests that a person's sex, as assigned at birth or defined by their chromosomes, is frequently still accorded primacy.

Tougher's discussion in Chapter 4 offers another perspective on the consequences of alterations to anatomical sex, this time through castration, from the historical example of eunuchs in Byzantium. A 'true' eunuch is a male who has been castrated, usually deliberately and before puberty, often in order to qualify for specialist roles (such as slaves, courtiers, administrators, musicians, singers and religious specialists). Early castration lessens the effect of the hormone androgen at puberty and produces the eunuch's characteristic high-pitched voice, lack of facial hair and 'female' distribution of body fat (as famously illustrated by the European *castrati*, men castrated before puberty in order to retain their soprano or alto voices). Castration was often enforced, as in the case of imported slaves who were portrayed with ambivalence and hostility in the late antique texts that Tougher analyses. Paradoxically, such men sometimes gained economically and in power and reputation, and Tougher suggests that by the early twelfth century, social perceptions of eunuchs had changed. Eunuchs were more likely to be recruited from within Byzantium: parents would castrate their own sons to give them opportunities for court careers, while some men chose to become religious eunuchs whose self-imposed chastity was thought to enable them to reach a higher state of purity than was attainable without castration. Tougher's discussion of this shift in the social circumstances of eunuchs is suggestive of how cultural perceptions of sex and gender are often inconsistent at any one time, and liable to alter in response to socio-economic and political change. My chapter, likewise, draws attention to the dynamics of cultural responses to intersex births and accidental mutilations.

## Long-term gender transformations

While genital surgery, or being born with ambiguous genitalia, can result in either enforced or voluntary gender transformations (with varying degrees of success), gender transformation is also possible *without* changing sex, in this case usually requiring some form of ritual marking and modifications to secondary sexual characteristics such as bodily hair. Such gender transformations are often discussed as 'cross-dressing' because they are always effected and expressed, at least in part, through clothing – a universal symbol of gender difference. Long-term or permanent gender alterations are discussed here as: transformations to a culturally recognised 'alternative' gender; disguise as someone of the 'opposite' gender; and

adoption of gender identities and roles that 'blend' aspects of both genders but lack formal cultural recognition as alternative genders. Historically and cross-culturally, it has been far more common for biological females to adopt aspects of the social identity, role and gender attributes of men on a long-term or permanent basis, than for men to dress, live and work as women. While the definition of 'female subordination' and the assumption of its universality is problematic (Sanday and Goodenough 1990), the general explanation for this lies with the limitations of socially acceptable roles for women, with the exceptions proving, on close scrutiny, to prove the rule.

## Women in transformed gender roles

In some strongly gender-differentiated societies, history, demography, custom and tradition combine to allow women to adopt at least some aspects of men's roles. One example comes from a remote region of the Himalayan foothills (Phillimore 1991). As elsewhere in South Asian society, it is extremely unusual for a woman to remain unmarried, for an unmarried woman is a burden and potential liability to her natal family. In the Himalayan foothills, however, some women choose to become female saints, called *sadhin*. A *sadhin* can take on many of a man's social roles and behavioural attributes, can wear men's clothes and can cut her hair short like a man. Becoming a *sadhin* is regarded as a respectable alternative to marriage for a female. Her status as a saint or ascetic, however, is not directly equivalent to that of a male renouncer. A man can become an ascetic, renouncing worldly responsibilities, at any time in his life, regardless of financial or family commitments, but a girl becomes a *sadhin* specifically at puberty as an alternative to marriage and remains living 'in the world', at home (Phillimore 1991: 332). In effect, she exchanges the status and reproductive potential of married womanhood for aspects of male religious privilege. Becoming a *sadhin* transforms her not into a man but into a celibate woman, who retains her female name with the suffix Devi. A further limit to her gender transformation is revealed in the ambiguity that surrounds her participation at cremations for, conventionally, Hindu cremations can only be attended by men.

A second example, discussed by Littlewood and Young in Chapter 5, comes from Northern Albania. Northern Albanian society is rigidly patriarchal, gender roles are firmly demarcated and women are expected to marry and have children. However, a Southern Balkan tradition, reported from Albania, Serbia, Kosovo, Bosnia, Montenegro and Macedonia, allows a woman access to male status and privilege by becoming a 'sworn virgin', known in Serb as *muskobanja* or 'man-like woman'. A girl, at puberty, may make a ritually marked vow to remain a virgin and thus to remain unmarried. She may take a masculine name, dress as a man, take a man's social role, with its corresponding social autonomy and physical freedoms, and be treated with deference by the women of her household. This institution is particularly important for households lacking a son because,

although not entitled to inherit property herself, a 'sworn virgin' holds rights in property as a conduit for her closest male descendants.<sup>2</sup> While particular women may have felt compelled to become sworn virgins because of family circumstance, Littlewood and Young's contemporary case material suggests that women may become 'sworn virgins' for the perceived advantages of the role.

This section would be incomplete without mention of the *berdache* or 'two spirit' traditions of the less strongly gender-differentiated societies of many Native American tribes, which sometimes included gender-transformed females (Blackwood 1984). 'Two spirits' were persons with qualities of both men and women, whose attire combined aspects of both, and whose spiritual knowledge and specialist skills were highly valued. Most 'two spirits' were gender-transformed males, but in perhaps ten to fifty percent of all the tribes with 'two spirits', female 'two spirits' were also recognised, sometimes by a distinct term, for instance, as *hwame* as distinct from *alyba* (male 'two spirits') among the Mohaves of the Colorado River area (Callender and Kochems 1983, Roscoe 1994). Female 'two spirits' participated in men's ceremonials including their sweat baths in which men seemed not to notice a female two-spirit's anatomical sex (Blackwood 1984: 32).

## Women disguised as men

Gender transformation for females has also been effected through a tradition of disguise. The European historical record documents some striking instances of female-to-male gender transformation in the many cases of women who disguised themselves as men in order to take up careers closed to women and thus to escape the restrictions of life as women. In the Middle Ages, certain women, some of whom became legendary, chose to live as men, 'in order to preserve their virginity and become closer to god', some eventually being canonised as saints (Bullough and Bullough 1993: 57, 51–6). The famous example of Joan of Arc (who wore male clothes, rallied French troops to victory against the English in the mid-fifteenth century and reversed the fortunes of Dauphin, Charles of France) actually departs from the tradition of full disguise as a man, for Joan did not conceal the fact that she was female. Nevertheless, her refusal to wear women's clothes became one of the excuses given for her execution (Bullough and Bullough 1993: 57); her canonisation only took place in 1920. The power of Joan's story, over the centuries, lies in the fact that Joan 'placed herself...on borders' (Warner 1981: 23), not just national boundaries, but the boundaries of sex and gender. Joan was viewed as an ambiguous female, who did not menstruate, had not been transformed to womanhood by marriage, and had remained in the liminal state of virginity that is often associated with power and danger (Hastrup 1978).

Over and over again, the theme of rebellion against the restrictions of women's lives occurs in historical accounts of women who disguised themselves as men, to become adventurers, sailors or soldiers (Wheelwright 1989, Bullough and Bullough 1993). One famous sixteenth century example, recorded in autobiography,



drama and a portrait, is of a Spanish woman, Catalina de Erauso, who escaped from a convent dressed as a man and then joined a galleon crew, sailed to South America, and enlisted in the Spanish army where she was promoted to the rank of ensign. When her sex was revealed, she became known as the 'nun-ensign' and on her return to Spain she was authorised by the Pope to continue wearing men's clothing (Bullough and Bullough 1993: 96, 111).

The late sixteenth to nineteenth centuries were the 'golden age' of female cross-dressing in Europe (Dekker and van de Pol 1988). Dutch records show that in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, one hundred and nineteen women set out for the Dutch East Indies disguised as men, in most cases not to follow lovers or husbands, as popular songs and stories would have it, but to escape their lot as women, to seek adventure and, most importantly, a better life (Dekker and van de Pol 1988, Bullough and Bullough 1993: 97–100). Wearing men's clothes and sometimes false beards and moustaches, some women even took to the seas as pirates. In 1720, two women, Mary Read and Anne Boney, were sentenced to death for their piracy (Bullough and Bullough 1993: 134). One Irish-born woman, Christian Davis, enlisted in the army disguised as a man and her sex was only discovered some years later when she was seriously wounded. She continued to serve in her regiment, with pay, until she died in 1775 in Dublin, where she 'was buried among the old pensioners with military honors' (Bullough and Bullough 1993: 101–3). One woman who cross-dressed to attend an Edinburgh medical school and become an army surgeon was discovered to be female only on her death in 1865 (Rae 1958).

Women dressed as men also served on both sides of the American Civil War, some of them subsequently writing about their experiences; many of them escaped detection until after their deaths (Bullough and Bullough 1993: 157–8). A detailed account of Russian army life during the Napoleonic Wars was written by a woman who, for ten years, was successfully disguised as a soldier (Durova 1988). Hundreds of Russian women disguised as men are reported to have fought in the First World War, their sex only being discovered if they were killed or wounded (Yurlova 1934, Botchkareva 1919, Wheelwright 1989: 33). In some of these cases at least, it is likely that the sex of the women was known to their comrades, who, being peasants, were well aware that women were 'as physically capable of enduring the privations of war as they were of other hardships' (Wheelwright 1989: 33). Women have also, of course, dressed in men's clothing in order to avoid the restrictions imposed by conventional female attire without attempting to 'pass' as men: in Europe and the United States from the late nineteenth century, their wearing of trousers provided a symbol of female liberation and confidence, as is famously illustrated by the example of the French novelist George Sand.

## Women with ‘manly’ attributes, and the issue of sexuality

A third form of gender transformation for women is the ‘gender bending’ that occurs when self-identified women are regarded by others as having at least some of the behavioural attributes of men. Some sixty years ago, Oscar Lewis reported ‘a unique type of female personality’, the ‘manly hearted woman’ or *ninau-poskitzipxpe*, among the North Piegan tribe of the Canadian Blackfoot Indians. Particular women were called ‘manly hearted’, for they behaved like stereotypical men rather than women, being generally aggressive and known for their sexual assertiveness (Lewis 1941). Neither homosexual, nor masculine in appearance, the ‘manly hearted women’ were always older, married or formerly married, women who had achieved their status as a result of their individual efforts, skills, wealth, reputed sexual assertiveness and aggressive personalities. The North Piegan were adamant that a young woman could not be ‘manly hearted’, although they thought it ‘nowadays’ easier for a young woman to be ‘bold’ than before. Lewis suggests that the status of ‘manly hearted’ women represents ‘a form of female protest in a man’s culture’ (1941: 184). The categorisation seems similar to the Polynesian *vehine mako* or ‘shark woman’, which is based on assertive sexuality rather than occupation (Kirkpatrick 1983: 177–8).

In contemporary Western Europe and North America, assertive or ‘boyish’ characteristics in girls, such as the cropped hair and trousers of the stereotypic ‘tomboy’, are now, in some contexts at least, viewed positively and certainly as less problematic than ‘sissy’ behaviour in a boy. The clothing styles of contemporary youth cultures are also more ‘unisex’ than previously. Nevertheless, subtle markers of gender remain, and individuals whose dress or attributes lack these markers may be regarded ambivalently or mistaken for the ‘opposite’ sex. Devor’s (1997) study of sixteen American women frequently mistaken for men shows how social acceptance remains problematic for women with ‘blended’ gender characteristics, perhaps especially so for heterosexual ‘gender blended’ women in comparison with those in homosexual relationships, presumably because the gender identity and sexuality of the latter conform to the Western cultural expectation that women who display ‘masculine’ gender characteristics are necessarily lesbian.<sup>3</sup>

The historical and ethnographic record reveals no simple or necessary link between a female-bodied woman’s sexuality, her gender role and her personal attributes. Despite academic and journalistic speculation about possible lesbian tendencies, the role of the Albanian virgin, like that of the Himalayan *sadbin*, is effectively an asexual one (Young 2000), while heterosexuality was a feature of being ‘manly hearted’ among the North Piegan (Lewis 1941). The recorded European history of females dressed as men indicates a range of sexualities. Some had been married to men before ‘passing’ as men themselves, or married men after their sex was revealed. Many, however, who ‘passed’ as men, including those who married women, remained celibate, while others had (clandestine) sexual relationships with women. In the Native American ‘two-spirit’ traditions, marriage was permissible with someone of the opposite gender and not with another ‘two-

spirit' person; the relationship was thus not regarded as a homosexual relationship in the Euro-American sense (Blackwood 1984).

Johnson in Chapter 6 discusses a case of female homosexuality in relation to a transformed gender identity for women in the Southern Philippines. The *tomboi* of the Southern Philippines are adult women who are 'like men' in their dress, demeanour, in the importance they accord to their occupations and in having sexual relationships with women. The category *tomboi* has a quite distinct local meaning, even though the Western term 'tomboy' has been incorporated into local discourse, in the Southern Philippines as across many parts of South East Asia.

Here, because heterosexual reproduction is central to women's identity, the *tomboi* are seen as deviant, for the dissociation between female sexuality and reproduction that they embody challenges the 'natural' pattern of gender and sexuality. Their non-productive and thus 'abnormal' female sexuality renders them vulnerable to abuse and violence from men, so that rather than 'coming out' as some lesbians in the West do, or as male 'gays' in the Southern Philippines (Johnson 1997), the *tomboi* constitute a muted gender category and must be circumspect in their behaviour to avoid drawing attention to themselves.

## Men in transformed gender roles

Long-term gender transformations for men include roles based on or originating in genital alteration or birth ambiguity, as well as roles that are independent of anatomical sex. Transformed or variant genders for males have usually been discussed in terms of institutionalised male 'cross-dressing' and homosexuality, in ways that often reflect observers' assumptions about 'abnormality' and 'inversion' more than they inform about indigenous perceptions of sex, gender and sexuality (Jacobs 1994, Herdt 1994).

The North American 'two spirit' traditions were first documented by European travellers from the seventeenth century onwards. One account of 'these Hermaphrodites', distinguishable from men and women by the colours of their headdress, stresses their servile status as effeminate men 'strongly inclined to sodomy' (Francisco Coreal 1722, quoted in Roscoe 1994: 329). It now seems that, far from being a servile position, the part-shamanistic status of the 'two spirit' offered a good career option for persons with special aptitudes for cross-gendered tasks and for youths who had seen visions that were signs of their special calling (Whitehead 1981: 100). In a society marked by relative equality and where gender roles were only rigorously enforced in relation to childrearing (Whitehead 1981: 105), rather than indicating 'downward mobility', the role was one of a variety of avenues for achieving individual status. Further, homosexual activity was not the leading motivation, as opportunities existed for this without becoming a 'two spirit' (Whitehead 1981: 96–7).

Other 'alternative genders' for men are more clearly associated with homosexuality. In Polynesia, where again gender disparity is not strongly marked, boys

inclined to feminine tasks may be trained to specialise in women's occupations as adults. The Polynesian terms for these roles, reported by western explorers and observers since the nineteenth century, include the Tahitian and Hawaiian term *mahu* (Kirkpatrick 1983: 177–8) and the Samoan term *fā'afafine* (Besnier 1994). Levy (1973: 74) considers the *mahu* 'a substitute female', Kirkpatrick (1983: 177) describes the category as a 'variant' gender role for men, while Besnier (1994) understands the *mahu* as a 'liminal' gender that draws attention, through contrast, to local definitions of masculinity. Undoubtedly, these categories have changed over time. In contemporary Polynesian contexts, gender-liminal men associate with tourists and expatriates, work as prostitutes, performers, or in domestic service, and borrow many aspects of Western 'gay' culture in their creation of modern gender-variant identities (Besnier 1994: 328; Bolin 1996: 29)

The homosexual element (described by Wikan 1977) is a defining part of an alternative gender role for men in the strongly gender-differentiated Muslim society of Oman. The term *xanith*, the Arabic for 'effeminate', 'soft' or 'impotent', denotes a category of men with characteristics of both men and women. They have masculine names, earn a living, own property, attend mosques and mix socially with men (which women, who observe *purdah*, cannot). Their clothing is distinctly intermediate: they wear ankle-length tunics as men do, with a tight waist like women, made from unpatterned but coloured cloth distinct from both the white cloth used for men's clothes and the patterned cloth for women. They do housework like women and their appearance is judged by standards of female beauty: fair skin, round cheeks, large eyes and shiny, heavily oiled hair, combed in women's styles. Particularly striking, in this strictly gender-segregated society, is that *xanith* also mix freely with women, singing with them at weddings and working alongside them as domestic servants.

The *xanith*'s distinct gender identity, Wikan argues, arises not from their anatomical sex but from Omani notions of the male role in sexual intercourse. In addition to their other activities, *xanith* are male homosexual prostitutes (in this gender-differentiated society, female prostitutes are difficult to find). The defining feature of maleness in Omani society is the ability to have penetrative sex with a woman, and what defines a *xanith* is that he is female in his role as a recipient. After some years, a *xanith* may choose to return to being a man, marry and have a family; proof that penetrative sex has occurred, as displayed by a bloodstained handkerchief after the wedding night, clinches this re-transformation. Wikan argues that the *xanith* role, occupied by approximately one in fifty men, provides economic opportunities for men in times of hardship and a sexual outlet, particularly for single men, which preserves the sexual modesty of women.<sup>4</sup>

## Temporary gender transformations

Temporary gender transformation through disguise may be a device to outwit an enemy, fool the gods, or avert evil spirits (Modi 1925). In Egypt, dressing a male child as a girl is said to protect him from the evil eye (Bullough 1969). Gender transformations are also common features of many rites of passage in which, sometimes, male initiates are dressed as girls, while girls are dressed as boys. An uninitiated girl or boy, not yet a fully social man or woman, is in a liminal state, having characteristics of both genders. In some male rites of passage, symbols associated with female qualities such as menstruation or lactation emphasise the boy's pre-adult status, when he associated with women, which he is now leaving behind (Turner 1967).

Short-term or intermittent gender transformations also feature in religious ritual in emulation or celebration of deities with cross-gendered identities. In ancient myth, the Sumerian goddess Inanna represented the 'non-domesticated woman, ... who does not behave in socially approved ways'; her devotees would wear the clothes of the opposite gender in rituals celebrating her power (Frymer-Kensky 1992: 25, 29). Sometimes, a gender-transformed individual achieves divinity, or gains spiritual powers, through possession by a deity or spirit. Unlike the gender transformations associated with becoming saints or ascetics discussed above (with respect to female saints in Christian Europe and the Himalayan foothills and the spiritual eunuchs of Byzantium), the gender alteration is temporary, although the change in religious status may be long-term.

Male possession in rural South India provides an intriguing example of bias existing 'against women in the religious sphere, in all castes' (Kapadia 1995: 125), effected through short-term gender transformation in institutionalised possession by a female deity. In order to become possessed, the devotee must allow himself to become symbolically female. The devotee permits his body to be pierced with spears, spikes, skewers and hooks, in an expression of the qualities of submission, obedience, sacrifice and suffering valued in women. By making himself vulnerable like a woman and temporarily relinquishing a man's power to control, the devotee enables the deity to possess him. This instance of gender reversal has a broader significance for gender and power, because the freedom to 'become' male, even temporarily in ritual, is not open to women. Moreover, because men can 'become' women renders women 'ideologically irrelevant' to religious ritual, reinforcing the ideological superiority of men and inferiority of women, a process which, Kapadia suggests, 'occurs very widely in men's possession events throughout India' (1995: 140–1, 157–60).

This example illustrates a common function of ritual gender reversals, that they serve to support the status quo through social and symbolic means. They may allow the expression of frustrations with an existing social order, without permanently disrupting the system (Turner 1967). On the other hand, ritual acts containing elements of gender reversal can also constitute challenges to an existing hierarchy, albeit temporarily (Ardener 1975). These themes of supporting and

sometimes challenging gender stereotypes and social hierarchies recur in the gender reversals of carnival and burlesque, and in comic and serious theatrical performances. In early European history, gender reversals in local festivals may have challenged, not merely reinforced, the social order. In early modern France, the dominant image of women as inferior to men, and disorderly because of their reproductive physiology, was challenged in comic theatrical performances, in which women dominated or made fools of men, and in ritual performances at local carnivals and festivals where women took men's roles and men became unruly cavorting women. In the urban uprisings of the transition to modern society, temporary gender reversals constituted a politically significant challenge to the social order. Women could 'get away with' politically subversive acts that men could not, because the fact that they were considered unruly made them less answerable for their actions (Zemon-Davis 1965).

### **Women playing men on the stage**

In both comic and serious theatre, in Europe and elsewhere up to the present day, there has, on the whole, been a less developed tradition of women playing men than of men playing women. It is well known from Shakespeare's plays that women's parts in Elizabethan England had to be played by boys or men because social restrictions prevented women from taking up acting careers. Women entered the stage at the English Restoration and following the Revolution in France, where several plays featured women going to war dressed as men. In the nineteenth century, with gender divisions in society becoming increasingly formal, 'gender impersonation became a staple on the stage' and by the end of the century, female impersonators of men outnumbered men playing female roles (Bullough and Bullough 1993: 226).

The role of the 'Principle Boy', discussed by Ardener in this volume (Chapter 8) as a star part of popular contemporary English pantomime, originated in the English theatre of the Victorian era. Ardener notes that actresses playing the 'breeches role' of Principle Boys always retained some clearly feminine attributes, such as a swelling bust, fat thighs, or small hands and feet, and this characteristic of Principle Boys was particularly approved by (male) critics of the time. Perhaps this was because it showed that the Boys were not seeking to deceive their audiences by 'passing' as men. Playing such roles may have provided women with opportunities for adventure denied them in ordinary life, by vicariously killing dragons, braving demons, outwitting enemies, and rescuing maidens, but if there was a symbolic challenge to gender conventions, it was not, usually, viewed as threatening. Various actresses became famous for their breeches parts, including Marie Wilton, who astonished Charles Dickens with the impudence of a performance that was 'so stupendously like a boy ... yet perfectly free from offence' (Baker 1968: 138), and Vesta Tilley, whose soprano voice always betrayed her sex, though it did not protect her from offending Queen Mary at a 1912 performance

(Baker 1968: 209). English music halls and American variety shows also gave women opportunities for more boisterous impersonations of men.

Some nineteenth-century actresses took male parts in serious theatre, for instance playing 'the boy who never grew up' in stage versions of the story of Peter Pan and playing men's roles in Shakespeare's plays, to extend their experience and display their acting skills. Sarah Bernhardt was one of the most well known of the fifty or so actresses who played Hamlet in the nineteenth century. Actresses may have particularly coveted roles such as Hamlet because they gave actresses opportunities to demonstrate their skills and extend their experience in ways denied by the more restricted parts written for women.

A genre of Japanese theatre called Takarazuka discussed by Powell in this volume (Chapter 9) offers an interesting contrast with the European history of female actors playing men's roles, for this Japanese genre is performed entirely by professionally trained women, whose skills include the impersonation of men. The Takarazuka theatre company, founded in 1914, had many of the functions of a finishing school for girls, the genre appealing particularly to teenage girls and their families. Powell shows how, although the ban on women appearing on the Japanese stage had been lifted in 1888, it took time for women actresses to be taken seriously as people who could act.

## Men playing women on the stage

In Japan, a tradition of men acting female roles in the highly stylised manner of *kabuki* developed in the seventeenth century when women were barred from the stage. For over two hundred years, Powell writes, playwrights wrote female parts knowing that male *kabuki* actors would play them. Actors specialised in female parts, honing the art of female impersonation in ways that, in the case of a famous early *kabuki* actor, included dressing and behaving like a woman off-stage as well. Female impersonation in the *kabuki* style enabled actors to demonstrate their skill *as actors*; indeed, one prominent present-day *kabuki* actor is also famous for acting female parts in non-*kabuki* genres, as Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth, for example. Within the *kabuki* tradition, however, the representation of women became so highly stylised that when women took to the *kabuki* stage from 1888, actresses playing women's parts continued to imitate the *kabuki* style.

In Europe, the tradition of men playing women in mainstream theatre declined from the seventeenth century when women were allowed on stage. Since the nineteenth century, in Europe and the United States, men have played women in the music hall tradition, particularly in 'drag performance', which Moore in this volume (Chapter 7) defines as men wearing women's clothes in an 'exaggerated burlesque'. Unlike the *kabuki* actors whose skills lie in accurate, if stylised, portrayals of women, drag performers, including the Dames of the English tradition of Christmas pantomime discussed by Ardener (Chapter 8), are quite clearly men dressed as women. Indeed, the comedy lies in this bending of

gender. A pantomime dame is an ugly and somewhat absurd woman whose banter is assertive and sexually explicit, a style usually associated with men. Ackroyd (1979: 104) suggests that by evoking a sexually aggressive woman and making fun of her, the Dame role elicits and then disperses the audience's fears of female sexuality and male homosexuality. In the United States, female impersonation featured in nineteenth century minstrel shows, in which, besides blackening their faces as minstrels, white men dressed as mulatto women or 'plantation yellow girls'. Toll (1974: 63) suggests that here the comedy served to assure the white man of his superiority.

Moore (Chapter 7) in this volume offers a challenge to the many recent studies of 'drag' performance through her analysis of drag performances in the 'gay village' of Ontario, Canada. Moore suggests that gay drag performances are best viewed, not as a means of asserting female inferiority, or as playing with transgressing gender boundaries, but as a means through which tensions and contradictions in definitions of masculinity are symbolically expressed. These tensions vary for different categories of participants and observers, but for gay men, Moore suggests, the drag performance, with its expressions of an underlying 'machismo', is a means of defining masculinity.

## Conclusion

Although gender identity is commonly regarded as 'fixed' and rooted in biology, changes to anatomical sex and gender identity have taken many forms, with different functions and meanings in a range of historical and cultural contexts. This introduction has attempted to provide an overview of the diversity of forms that such transformations have taken across cultures and throughout history. These range from changes to bodily sex, to long-term gender transformations, to short-term gender reversals.

In the recent Western medical tradition, where it is possible surgically to 'correct' genital ambiguity and change an adult's anatomical sex, we see the continuing influence of a two-gender model that is rooted in assumptions about the salience of sex-difference, as it is defined by chromosomes or legally assigned at birth. Departures from the two-sex model continue to challenge our sense of order, predictability and 'proper' sexuality. Gender and sex categories have also been challenged through long-term gender transformations, made in response to the restrictions of women's roles, in times of social upheaval, to fulfill culturally sanctioned alternative social or spiritual roles, and in some instances also linked with homosexuality. Such transformations are often ultimately restricted, in subtle ways, by aspects of the continuing salience accorded to biological sex. Finally, short-term gender reversals in ritual, carnival and theatre may provide symbolic challenges to conventional categories, but cross-gender impersonation is often highly stereotypical, usually serving to reinforce, for the audience, local ideas of femininity or masculinity as much as they challenge them.



The individual case studies presented in the following chapters explore in further details some of these transformations, their forms, functions and meanings, in the specific contexts in which they occur. We turn, first, to discussions of the context and consequences of changes to bodily sex in contemporary Europe and America.

## Notes

1. For a discussion of attempts to identify biological causes of transsexualism see Devor 1989: 20–22 and 1997.
2. A similar result may ensue, occasionally, among the Nuer of Southern Sudan, when a widow brings her children to live with her natal kin and, over time, becomes viewed as constituting a patrilineal link between her son and her father, and thus as having ‘become a man’ (Evans-Pritchard 1951: 16). The Nuer offer another example of a woman taking on aspects of a man’s social role in the institution of ‘woman-woman’ marriage. A Nuer girl becomes a woman at marriage, but is not fully a wife until she bears children. If she is barren, she can instead follow the rituals of conventional (male-female) marriage, take a wife and become a husband. Any children her wife bears are then legally hers. A barren woman married in this way ‘counts in some respects as a man’, for she is entitled to acquire cattle through inheritance, and is treated deferentially by her wives and children, but the extent to which female-husbands changed their dress and demeanour is not clear from Evans-Pritchard’s account (1951: 108–109).
3. For a discussion of the relationship between childhood cross-gender identity, adult homosexuality, cross-dressing and transsexuality see Bullough and Bullough 1993: 30–1.
4. For evidence of roles for men who wish to resemble women elsewhere in the Islamic world, see Bullough and Bullough 1993: 12–14.

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