

Historical Eating Disorders Among the Transmasculine

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6 November 2021

Abstract

Anorexia among the transmasculine is an endophenotype; it is present in history. Some cases have presumed drive for thinness even in the historical context.

The psychiatric literature has suggested looking for endophenotypes of anorexia nervosa (Treasure 2007); transmasculinity among those with eating disorders surely qualifies. Like the Italian anorexics described by Bell (1987), they are recognizable in the historical context.

Hirschfeld's Science

For the transmasculine in particular, occupation is proof of gender identity (Herrn 2005, 133). Hirschfeld (1925, 516–17) notes female soldiers as part of the general picture.

In such cases, the desire for body modifications is endogenous (Herrn 2005, 84; 2005, 103–7; 2005, 175–84).

Clothing

Those needing to wear men's clothing also have noticeably masculine traits and tendencies (Herrn 2005, 49–50); one's need to wear gendered clothes is part and proof of the constitutional intersex (Herrn 2005, 90, p. 96).

History

Hilarion the Eunuch

Hilarion the Eunuch entered a monastery and was assumed to be a eunuch; he was beardless.

The breasts were withered by asceticism and he had no menses, presumably on account of the meagre food intake (“The Story of the Two Daughters of King Zeno.” n.d.).

One can consider harsh fasting to be another form of body modification, like the more familiar castration (Herrn 2005, 169).

Amma Sarah

Amma Sarah’s gender identity is tenuously attested: “I am a woman by nature ... but in mind I am a man.”

Her anorexia is easy to deduce:

Unless your stomach hurts, and unless you slim down your body and become like a dried up tree, how will the grace of the Spirit reside in you?

Pelagius of Antioch

Pelagius of Antioch, a reformed prostitute, became a monk and lived in seclusion, known as a eunuch. He gave blessings as a monk.

His fasting was extreme, so that he was unrecognizable:

Her eyes were deeply sunken, and the bones in her face protruded because of her great and boundless fasting.

His cell was fittingly austere; it had no doors and only one window.

His male role was secure enough that when clergy knew about his woman parts, they did not wish to make this known publicly (James, n.d.).

The severity of his bodily wasting is a testament to the urgency of modifying one’s body, not merely dress.

Joan of Arc

Joan of Arc’s abstemious food habits were notable to her companions (Harrison 2014, 166; Warner 1981, 21); she did not menstruate (Harrison 2014, 44).

Gender Identity

Her trans identity is easily argued: she wore men’s clothes throughout her campaign, enjoying flashy dress (Harrison 2014, 66; 2014, 230; Warner 1981, 8). This taste for clothing contrasts (Harrison 2014, 296) with the otherwise unadorned anorexics and with her conservatism elsewhere. She also cut her hair in the male style (Harrison 2014, 68). Joan fit in in male social circles; her fellow soldiers did not consider it possible to lust after her (Harrison 2014, 83).

Her case was noted by Hirschfeld (1925, 529) among the cases of female soldiers.

Personality

Joan was an atypically sensitive soldier (Harrison 2014, 4); she carried a standard into battle rather than a sword because she did not want to kill anyone (Harrison 2014, 118). She was also uptight: she asked her soldiers not to swear and was horrified by gambling (Harrison 2014, 127–28). She was punctilious in confession (for herself and her soldiers) and the Eucharist (Harrison 2014, 151).

Her intelligence was apparent in training and trial, she learned martial skills quickly (Harrison 2014, 176) and she retained her acute memory even under inquisition (Harrison 2014, 272).

Joan was bold and carried a certainty in her interior above all else (Harrison 2014, 92–94; 2014, 285; Warner 1981, 5; 1981, 26; 1981, 93); her impetuosity blended with an admirable disregard for the worldly (Harrison 2014, 140; 2014, 190; 2014, 203–4) and indifference to bodily injury (Harrison 2014, 239). War provided her the single goal she needed (Harrison 2014, 199); she preferred unity and this simplicity (Warner 1981, 42).

Simone Weil

Weil's lack of connection with womanhood is easily established: she signed letters to her parents with "Your son, Simon." She did not at any point take on the female role in heterosexuality (Moi 2021).

Simone Weil's strange food habits were with her all her life: neurotic and thin, she had visceral reactions to certain foods and to contamination even as a child (Moi 2021).

She refused all food though diagnosed with tuberculosis; she wanted to eat no more than the people of occupied France. This killed her (Behar and Arancibia 2015), she died in a sanatorium (Moi 2021).

Confessional-Trial Axis

From Moi (2021):

We don't admire Simone Weil because we agree with her, Susan Sontag argued in 1963 ... What we admire, Sontag thought, is her extreme seriousness, her absolute effort to become 'excruciatingly identical with her ideas'

In the anorexic, the self is defined by trial (McHale 2021), not aspiration or even thought. At best, one's mind is matter, conversely the world's badness defines the self. Of Joan: "Her individuality created the reality" (Warner 1981, 3).

Again, Moi (2021):

I am struck by her [Weil's] loneliness. ... her purity inspired fear.

In Joan: she saw others as characters in her mission rather than personalities, she was hardly cowed by reality (Harrison 2014, 233). This surety led the English to truly fear her as a witch or agent of the devil.

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