

Gyrid GUNNES

## Queering the Body

*During the practical semester of my theological studies in the Lutheran Church, I worked in the parish of Tromsøysund, a suburban parish of my home town Tromsø, in Northern Norway. During Easter, services were held in the chapels in the villages of Lakselvbukt and Sjursnes. In these chapels, located about two hours by car outside Tromsø, I could not do any training for the priesthood. I could read from the Scripture but I could not have any clerical function. The only reason I could not and in the near future will not be able to work as what I have a seven year long training in doing, is the shape of my genitals. I have the body of a women.*

*The Norwegian Lutheran Church has been ordaining women for thirty years. Still, in some parts of the country, especially in the Northern and Western parts, female ordination is still not accepted. And as I sit in the benches of Lakselvbukt chapel I wonder: why is this so? Discrimination of a person because of his or her sex is in all other parts of Norwegian society considered equivalent to discrimination due to colour. What is it that makes the shape of the body so important to selection of priests?*

### WHY IS IT SO?

The denial of priesthood to women can and should be interpreted as a way of limiting women's possibilities to equal participation in society. It is a grave example of the global oppression of women. But can it also be interpreted differently, not letting the first perspective go, but taking another perspective in addition. This is the perspective of body which I wish to develop in the following. It is a tentative perspective, open to criticism and change.

I sit in Lakselvbukt chapel. I ask my self what is it that I take part in. Around me I see men dressed in suits, women dressed in skirts, most of them covering their heads. Lakselvbukt is a traditional community. And then I look at the priest. I see a man, dressed in his liturgical clothing. Like all other liturgical clothing, it is a dress. I see a man in a dress.

The priest, as he performs the ritual of Sunday service, performs a *drag show*. It is a highly untraditional drag show, without any glamour or makeup, not in a night-club, but in a church, but still it is a drag show. He covers his body, which is called male, in a suit of clothing, a dress. And dresses are considered to be for women. How can we understand this?

### ONE OR TWO SEXES?

Until the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the understanding of the difference of men and women rested to a great extent on the teaching

of the Greek doctor GALEN in the first century after Christ (ARRHENIUS, 1999). His theory was that men and women have the same sex, but that women are underdeveloped men. She does not produce enough warmth in her body to become a man. But there was no absolute difference between women and men (SCHIEBLINGER, 2000). The meaning that was ascribed to the sex, the gender, became a matter of what you did, your work and your way of dressing.

With the growth of modern science, the way of thinking about the differences between women and men changed. Although, in earlier times, too, children with vaginas were taught to have the gender "women" and children with a penis were taught to be "men", modern science located the difference of the sexes in the body itself, in genitals, cells, hormones and in the brain. The whole body became sexed.

The difference became absolute, and was not any longer a question of a scale where women were further down on the scale than men. This makes the absolute biological differences between the bodies a guarantor for the absolute differences in gender roles. The XVIII<sup>th</sup> century biologist would tell me this: "You have a female body (your sex), therefore you are kind, neutering, loving, caring and less intelligent than men (your gender). Because of your body, you can not be a priest nor a prime minister." Fixing the content of the gender to sexes which are absolute should be seen as a patriarchal attempt to find a scientific explanation for women's inferior position in society.

### THE QUEERED BODY

Using biology as a guarantor for gender roles introduces a problem: the body is *ambivalent*. The body resists the categories of being either male or female, separate and different. My female body just has hairy legs (which it is not supposed to). My female body has hairy armpits. My grandmother nearly has a beard. I used to have two centimetres of hair on my head. I have strong muscles which enables me to carry my luggage and open all doors myself. I have breasts and a vagina and ovaries, but I may choose not to use them for reproduction. I can decide when and if I want to have children. My body, like all other bodies, is queer.

This shows that on the level of biology, the difference is not as absolute as some wish to think. And the content of the genders ascribed to each sex is arbitrary. Being a male today and fifty years ago is different. The content of the genders changes. The co-relation that penis means trousers and vagina means skirt or dress is arbitrary and contextually determined. So patriarchy needs to handle the ambivalence of the



body, at the same time take it into account but still prevent it from contaminating society. This contamination would make people question biology as a justification of the gender roles.

### HOW TO HANDLE THE AMBIVALENT BODY

One way of handling it is violence. Senior advisor in the Norwegian Directory of Health, Berit AUSTVEG, has, through working with African female refugee who are victims of genital mutilation, showed that *genital mutilation* (also called circumcision) can be understood as a violent act to bring under control the queerness of the body. The female clitoris can be understood as a small penis, a trace of maleness on the female body. The clitoris then becomes a threat to the absolute difference between women and men. It has to be cut of.

Can ritual be understood as the tool for handling this ambivalence of the body? The structuralist anthropologist Victor TURNER has studied *rites of passage*, showing that such and similar rites enables society and individuals to tackle transition and ambivalence. Once inside the ritual (the *liming phase*) the participant(s) is not confined to their social status (age, position and, in our case, gender), but is neither and both, she or he is ambivalent. If the participant (or the society) would remain liminal, the structure of order (in this case the patriarchal order of the connection of gender and sex) would break down.

### IS SUNDAY SERVICE REALLY A DRAG-SHOW?

The ritual of Sunday service can be seen as a way of handling the dangerous queerness of our bodies. The ritual, in its liminal phase, is a space where the structures of the society are set aside. God becomes human. Bread and wine become flesh and blood. The male becomes female. Things are not what they seem to be. The priest performs a ritualised drag-show, at the same time acting and embodies the ambivalence and the danger of the body, but though doing it in a ritual, *the ambivalence is fixed to the ritual*.

The priest as a drag-artist is a scapegoat, bearing not the guilt, but the ambivalence of the congregation. He represents not Christ's maleness but the ambivalence of masculinity. In the ritual the forces that question the gender structures of society are loose, but when we say the last *amen*, we bind them, we enter the *postliminal phase* where the world order is re-established. Bread is bread and female and male are separated. The members of the congregation leave their seats, men wearing suits, women wearing dresses and skirts and covering their heads. Cosmos and patriarchy has once more been restored. The priest takes off his dress away from the congregation, and comes back as a male. We celebrate the successful return to the order of gender with tea and cakes afterwards.

### THE HOPE FOR A DIFFERENT FUTURE

Our bodies are ambivalent. Our gender roles are changing. In a society where this would be taken seriously, I believe that the shape of the genitals would not shape our lives as it does today. This would be a society where violence and scapegoating would not be necessary tools for suppressing the ambivalence. My body and the body of my boyfriend might be different (and alike), but does it matter when it comes to shaping our lives?

Suggested Readings:

SCHIEBRINGER Londa, *Feminism and the Body*. Oxford, 2000.

ARRHENIUS Sara, *En ekte kvinne – en kritikk av den nye biologismen (A Real Women – A Critique of the New Biologism)*. Oslo, 1999.

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### SEX AND GENDER

The terminology of sex and gender are sociological terms developed to differentiate between the shape of the genitals (sex) and the societal meaning given to these shapes (the gender). The gender-sex term seeks to show that there is no eternal, given once and for all connection between the body and the qualities and roles ascribed to the body. Being a female (sex) does not have to be connected to being gentle, caring, warm, loving and being a parent.

These qualities are given to people with one kind of body through upbringing, but they do not derive from the body itself. In this way the sex-gender differentiating serves to dethrone the stereotype gender roles through depriving them of their self-acclaimed authority in nature and biology. The sex-gender terminology is a good analytic tool for understanding the huge variations between cultures of what it means to be a woman or a man. The body is the same, but the gender roles change according to culture and time.

One of the *critiques* towards the gender-sex dichotomy is that it is not possible to differentiate between the body and the gender which is played out in society. The body is never experienced in itself as pure biology. Being a human being is in itself a truly hermeneutic state, which means that everything, down to the most basic bodily process is interpreted and given meaning by the society we live in.

Every healthy woman has a menstruation cycle, but how menstruation is interpreted varies a lot between cultures (from seeing it as a state of impurity to not giving it much significance). This shows that it is impossible to distinguish between the biology as something which is in itself and the gender that is the qualities ascribed to the sex. On the other hand, the terminology of gender and sex can be a useful one, although it is important to state that biology (sex) does not mean something which is outside the realm of interpretation, social construction and change.

### QUEER

Queer originally meant «strange» and «particular». It has also functioned as a name for gays and lesbians. With the development of «queer theory» in the 80s it has come to have a slightly different meaning. Queer theory aims to deconstruct all common ways of thinking about gender and sexual orientation. It questions the reason why we are so fixed in the absolute difference of what we call «male» or «female». It puts a question mark on why we always speak in terms of «heterosexuality» or «homosexuality», as though the two were opponents.

A queer look at the world is to destabilise the known categories and think in terms of «both», not «or». It even questions the notion of why be either male or female, why not be both. The queer is what is indefinable within traditional categories, it is the difference, and it is proud to be different. The queer is the ambivalent, the strange. It is not a new category, not a new gender, but a perspective that tries to eliminate all categories.