

Transsexual Birds and Bees

By Margo

For a number of years, the Erickson Educational Foundation (EEF) in Baton Rouge, La., has been carrying on research and education in the area of transsexualism and gender identity. This organization, which seems to consist mainly of straight and non-transsexual professionals, is concerned with sponsoring frequent conferences on gender development from a clinical viewpoint, as well as with publishing information about transsexualism.

A reading of some EEF literature suggests that this organization is indeed providing generally accurate information for both transsexuals (female-to-male as well as male-to-female) and their friends, at least as far as the medical realities of sex change procedures are concerned. However, EEF may have the same shortcomings as the early Homophile movements of the Fifties tended to have: the stress in both cases is on acceptance within straight society rather than the creation of a new Gay culture with radically new values about sex and gender.

In any area of human sexuality, knowledge of the birds and bees, the basic physical and psychological realities, is certainly a precondition of liberation. For example, during the early and middle Sixties, more and more women became acquainted with the facts of birth control and abortion; but such knowledge was not of itself liberating; for that a feminist movement was and is necessary. We have found also that knowing the facts of life about Lesbianism (or Gay love in general) is only a prelude to the emotional and cultural process of liberation. What the EEF does is to provide transsexuals with the "birds and bees"; but this necessary step is not sufficient.

For example, the pamphlet *Information for the Family of the Transsexual* gives good information on the many physical and legal processes required to change sex in one direction or the other; it should certainly enlighten those who imagine that transsexualism is an easy decision or that medically it only involves "having an operation." Hormone therapy, electrolysis or mastectomy, and various administrative and legal processes are all necessary; in addition to physical pain and

discomfort there is social oppression and internal emotional struggle. In stating the basic facts of what it means to be transsexual, and in calling for tolerance, this leaflet certainly must be commended.

However, even on a medical level, there are political (or if you prefer, "cultural") considerations which EEF does not explore. For example, why is it that so much emphasis is placed in male-to-female surgery on constructing a functional vagina, but so little on creating a functional clitoris? What are some of the forms of psychiatric oppression which may be perpetrated by the screening committees which many transsexuals must confront in seeking surgery (remember therapeutic abortions)?

As a male-to-female transsexual who is also a radical Lesbian, I wonder about statements like: "... for the transsexual girl, the breast development and the onset of menstruation so prized by the heterosexual girl are deeply repugnant to her." What about the young Lesbian woman? She is not mentioned.

Another generally useful pamphlet, *Legal Aspects of Transsexualism*, unfortunately contains similar heterosexual biases. For example, this pamphlet includes a section on "Divorce, Marriage and Sex" which offers the following advice: "The transsexual, like all other citizens, is liable under the law for fornication and adultery. In most states, a transsexual who engages in sexual relations with his or her mate is not in violation of the law. The keynote in such matters is discretion." Note that "fornication" and "adultery" are both *heterosexual* offenses as usually defined; Gay sex involving transsexuals is not so much as mentioned. Such silence is indeed oppressive for someone struggling against two or three levels of sexism simultaneously.

One positive note: the pamphlets mentioned (plus a third, *Religious Aspects of Transsexualism*, which is a collection of friendly statements by various religious figures) make a real attempt to give equal time to the plight of the female-to-male transsexual. Since there is no male figure to compare with Christine Jorgensen in public notice, it is not surprising that male-to-female transsexuals have



"come out" so far, having the benefit of a well-known precedent for their own feelings. Part of sexism is the extra attention granted to a native male in doing anything including even changing gender. But with better information about female-to-male transsexuals, these brothers are proving

more and more numerous in our midst. In short, read EEF literature as you would read homophile or sex education material in the Fifties; be grateful for the basic information, and for the people with the courage to put it out; but recognize it as the beginning of a long struggle.

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