

TRANSADVOCATE

Trans Erasure and the Old Bailey

By Guest

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Abstract

Today's guest post is from Catherine Butler. Butler is an academic and writer, living in Bristol, UK and blogs here. Trans erasure happens in all kinds of places, but it happens most to those who lack a voice: children, the poor and ill-educated, and the dead. A young child gets bullied at school for preferring [...]

Article

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Trans erasure happens in all kinds of places, but it happens most to those who lack a voice: children, the poor and ill-educated, and the dead.

A young child gets bullied at school for preferring dolls to football. Teachers can know nothing about the child's future sexuality. Nor can they know whether the child is trans. Maybe the child just likes dolls, end of? But the form on which they record the incident has only one box, and it is marked "homophobic bullying". If she was a trans girl, that fact is erased.

Then there's the 2010 case of Malawian Tiwonge Chimbalanga, possibly trans, possibly intersex, but pretty clearly not (pace most of the Western media) a gay man. But then, what would she know about her own identity? According to the New York Times' unnamed Western "experts" (who have never met her) she is "a gay man in a repressed society desperate to think himself a woman".

Now we have BBC Radio 4's series *Voices from the Old Bailey*, which draws on the Old Bailey transcripts to give us a glimpse of eighteenth-century criminal life. This week they did a programme about homosexuality. Except that one of the cases, about "Princess Seraphina" (the segment starts at 27.30) sounds to me as if it's actually about a trans woman. (If you want to look at the actual Old Bailey transcript for this case, it's [here](#).)

The year is 1732. The woman, known to herself and her friends as Princess Seraphina, was not in fact in the dock. Having been robbed, she was told by her assailant that if she tried to prosecute he would say that she had tried to bugger him - but she went ahead and prosecuted anyway. In the event, the man was acquitted - but as one of the show's guests remarks with surprise, Seraphina herself wasn't prosecuted for sodomy. Perhaps that might be because she hadn't done it?

Seraphina clearly lived as a woman in so far as was possible, had a close circle of female friends, and was well liked and accepted. (The show refers to these women as "admirers" and "a bevy of female acolytes", but they sound very much like friends to me.) However, the presenter Amanda Vickery and all three of

her guests assume throughout that she is a crossdressing gay man. Now, this reading is possible, but the possibility (probability, I'd say) that she might be trans occurs to none of them. Kudos to Vickery for referring to her as "she" on the grounds that that's the pronoun she clearly preferred, but guest Rictor Norton in particular continually misgenders her. There's a lot of twaddle about pantomime, camp, theatricality, etc, and how she was a "parody of a woman" engaged in a "performance" (not in the Judith Butler sense that everybody is engaged in performance all the time, but in the sense of pretending to be something she wasn't). She is also cast as an attention seeker. Says guest Helen Berry: "I personally think that Princess Seraphina was nothing if not a drama queen, and I think she absolutely relished her moment in the spotlight with all those judges and everybody looking at her." You think? None of this is evidenced by the transcript, which shows that she brought the prosecution under some duress from witnesses who wanted their share of any potential reward. All this superstructure of motivation, etc, is built on assumption that she must have been a camp gay man. One of the speakers is reminded of Kenneth Williams.

The programme also refers to a telling incident, involving not Seraphina herself but one of her acquaintance:

"t'other went to the Masquerade in a Velvet Domine, and pick'd up an old Gentleman, and went to Bed with him, but as soon as the old Fellow found that he had got a Man by his Side, he cry'd out, Murder".

I'm not an expert on gay culture, but this doesn't sound like a gay pick-up to me. Isn't it more usual for gay men to go to bed with other gay men, rather than with heterosexuals? It does, however sound very much like a "trans panic" reaction - 250 years avant la lettre.

There is of course a problem of terminology here: "trans" is not a word that was current in 1732. But then, no more were "gay", "homosexual", "heterosexual", "camp" or "drag queen". As a term, "trans" is neither less nor more anachronistic or problematic than any of the rest. Some of the guests were wary of claiming that there was a "coherent gay identity in eighteenth-century England". Others, along with the BBC publicity (which described the programme as exploring "the lives of gay men in the 18th century"), were less so. Rictor Norton had no problems in claiming the programme's subjects as "a group with which I [as a gay man] have a cultural affinity... I really do recognize them as gay men in the modern sense of the word 'gay'. I really do think you need to reclaim your past before you can fight for the good gay future."

Reclaiming your history is fine - but you can't, if it's been erased. My question is, where is the trans history? When, as in this programme, the question of gender identity is never even mentioned, it becomes invisible, assimilated to other histories. This erasure of real lives is bad in itself; but it also has the effect that being trans can be dismissed as a specifically-modern, specifically-Western phenomenon, "invented" by male sexologists for their own sinister purposes. That's why we need a trans history.

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