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“Both Your Sexes”: A Non-Binary Approach to Gender History, Trans Studies and the Making of the Self in Modern Britain

by *Mo Moulton* 

In 1941, as middle age and the Blitz combined to heighten her sense of her own mortality, historian and playwright Muriel St. Clare Byrne (1895-1984) sent a draft of her memoir to a friend, the writer Harold Child. Published the following year as *Common or Garden Child*, the memoir is a fragmented, vivid meditation on what it was like to grow up at the turn of the 19th century, having been designated a girl but inhabiting (or longing to inhabit) a variety of manifestations of masculinity. In his reply, Child reassured Byrne: ‘I don’t see any trace of your having “ought to have been a boy”; but I do see your enormous luck in being a girl with the advantages of being a boy and the power to make use of them; so that you got most of the benefits of both your sexes.’ In a subsequent letter, he wrote: ‘But after so much association with men you must have found it mighty hard to become respectable and ladylike on the outside. Inside, of course, you never did and never will.’¹

In a few brief lines, Child’s letters open up the complex and rapidly-evolving conversations about bodies and selves occurring in mid-twentieth-century Britain (and elsewhere). Echoing Havelock Ellis’s description of a female invert as someone whose ‘instinctive gestures and habits ... may suggest to female acquaintances the remark that such a person “ought to have been a man”’, Child evokes debates within sexology, psychoanalysis, embryology, endocrinology, and popular culture on the nature of sex and the question of whether people embodied more than one sex, in whole or in part, temporarily or permanently.² Contrasting an exterior that is ‘respectable and ladylike’ with an interior experience that is neither of those things, he also suggests a gap between inner selfhood and external performance, and he grounds that selfhood in relationships – in Byrne’s case, ‘so much association with men’.

Neither Byrne nor Child use the word ‘gender’ in their discussions of sex, selfhood, and social expectations. This is not surprising. The use of gender most familiar today, as a category related more to expression and social roles than to embodiment, dates only from the mid-twentieth century. It would be a standard historiographical move, nonetheless, to interpret Byrne’s rich personal archive

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through the analytical tool of gender, using it to explore how she deployed masculinity and femininity as modes of self-expression and agency, as well as, perhaps, considering the relationship between her gender and her sexuality using the evidence for her lifelong relationships with women. In this essay, however, I want to ask: what does such a turn to ‘gender’ obscure? Recent work in trans studies has built up a detailed picture of the history of gender as a category, from its emergence as a diagnostic and social-scientific category in the early to mid twentieth century to its subsequent remaking by feminist and queer scholars and activists. Byrne’s archive is itself a part of that history, evidence of how one person engaged with contemporary ideas about sex, psychoanalysis, and social roles to forge a legible sense of self in the very decades when ‘gender’ was being developed. Rewriting psychosexual models of development as well as new concepts of social construction, she retained an investment in the concept of ‘bi-sexuality’, charting an alternative trajectory of coming into ‘both her sexes’ in her memoir. I argue that, by historicizing the categorical divisions of sex, gender, and sexuality, historians can allow such older, less familiar ways of thinking to come into sharper focus, underscoring the impermanence of our own categories as well.

In making that argument, I develop what I call a non-binary historical methodology, in conversation with Wong Bing Hao’s concept of a non-binary methodology as ‘one that acknowledges as critical tools the complications, lived realities, imbrications and visceral desires of gendered life’.³ Embracing simultaneous multiplicity in all senses, such an approach is inspired by recent efforts to move queer studies beyond anti-normativity: in other words, taking Byrne’s approach to sex as significant for its diversity and complexity but not necessarily for its transgressiveness.⁴ A non-binary historical methodology is also one that emphasizes the simultaneous presence of both past and contemporary ways of knowing within any project of historical interpretation. One tradition of historical work on sexuality emphasizes difference, often glossed as the radical alterity of the past. Laura Doan, for example, asks: how do we write the history of sexuality when one’s subjects used no such category?⁵ Doan argues for a critical queer history that would takes the past more fully on its own terms, recognizing that a category of analysis, such as sexuality, may distort beyond recognition historical ways of understanding that were not indebted to that category. This is not a pedantic point about anachronistic language, but a vital project of not allowing present categories to suppress past – and thus, potentially, future – ways of knowing and being. Writing about South Asia, Indrani Chatterjee traces how practices and categories understood diversely as forms of ritual, religion, governance, or lineage were re-defined as sexual deviance by colonizers. Thus ‘revered tantric warrior-priests, merchants, and Sufi Muslim stewards of treasuries (*khwajaserais*) were all reduced to being “eunuchs”’.⁶ She names the scholarly acquiescence in this category of sexuality, and its application across time and space, a form of ‘discursive colonization’ that, among other things, ‘ensures that these older, contentious, monastic-ascetic grammars, epistemes, and ontologies will remain unimagined as honorable forms of being or thought in the past’.⁷

Here I take gender, and the gender/sex/sexuality schema in particular, as *categorically* contingent, just one particular and rather recent way of parsing the entangled experiences of bodies, desires, and all the varied relationships between oneself and the rest of humanity. I argue that historians, in particular, have much to learn from a project, not of rejecting gender, but of provincializing it, both historically and culturally.⁸ Refusing to take gender as a universal category, I contend, allows us more easily to perceive other ways of knowing about bodies, the reproduction of society, and the creation and maintenance of the self.⁹ To borrow Anjali Arondekar’s striking phrase, I want to think about ways of understanding and experiencing desire, embodiment, relationships, and selfhood as sites of ‘radical abundance’.¹⁰ This is not only about the alterity of the past. I draw on queer and trans scholarship that underscores how historical work is always a dialogue with the present; our own desires and concepts are part of the touch across time that Carolyn Dinshaw says characterizes the writing of history.¹¹ I adopt the language of a non-binary methodology in order to suggest that we do not need to choose between past and present, but instead that we can hold our own categories more lightly, leaving space for a fuller recognition of past (and future) ways of being. In undertaking a reading of Byrne’s life, I am aware of participating in the long tradition of queer and ancestral genealogical projects – am aware, in other words, that Byrne’s life “slant rhymes” with my own, in Hil Malatino’s phrase, and that in breaking up sex/gender/sexuality as the dominant categories of analysis, I reach for other categories that bear their own heavy legacies.¹² My hope is that, by letting the terms of Byrne’s life collide with the terms of contemporary scholarship, I might shake apart some assumptions that limit the histories now available to us.

My choice of Muriel St. Clare Byrne as a subject deserves some explanation. Byrne was born in 1895 just south of Liverpool. After a middle-class upbringing, she attended Somerville College, Oxford. Like many of her friends, she participated in particular forms of fairly masculine sociability within educational institutions for women.¹³ Her professional life was defined by a certain precarity at the margins of academia and writing. She worked for the YMCA as a teacher briefly, during World War I; finding herself unable to secure a permanent academic job, she embarked on alternative career as a writer, researcher, and part-time substitute lecturer, most notably at Bedford College and the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts. By the time she embarked on writing her memoir, she had achieved a considerable reputation as the author of popular but serious histories of Tudor England that considered daily life as an important aspect of historical enquiry. She also wrote plays, including the very successful detective play *Busman’s Honeymoon*, co-written with her friend Dorothy L. Sayers, author of the wildly popular Lord Peter Wimsey series.¹⁴ Representative of a generation of educated middle-class white British women who were able to support themselves respectably outside the family, Byrne was neither impossibly transgressive nor particularly unique.

Byrne makes a useful focus for this article for several reasons. First, there’s the abundance of her archive: published work, correspondence, notebooks, snapshots,

wills, household bills and birth certificates, all housed in the Somerville College Library at Oxford. Second, her relative ordinariness is useful. As she suggests in her coy memoir title, she was both ordinary and extraordinary. Untouched by real celebrity or scandal, she lived a life centred around the Public Record Office, the British Museum, and the quiet London home she shared with her partner and their cats and dogs. Unlike the ‘female husbands’ who have been studied by scholars such as Jen Manion and Alison Oram, she lived her adult life, as far as I know, using female pronouns and honorifics (a precedent I follow here) and staying just within the boundaries of acceptable clothing for women.¹⁵ But although she made different choices with respect to pronouns and hormones than did near contemporaries such as Alan Hart, Michael Dillon, Ewen Forbes, and Mark Weston, who are more readily assimilated into a history of the modern category of trans, there are significant commonalities in experience and expression that have much to tell us about the landscape of sexed subjectivity in the first half of the twentieth century: what was being invented, and what was being shut down, in the encounter between these people and the psychological and diagnostic models emerging around them.¹⁶ Following the lead of scholars of trans life such as C. Riley Snorton, M. W. Bychowski, Emma Heaney, and Jules Gill-Peterson, I find in Byrne’s common or garden life a way of being that exceeds the teleologies of gender that would come to define the medical models of the second half of the century.¹⁷ The material traces of that life, produced at a contentious, fraught angle to contemporary medical and psychoanalytic discourses, reopen the landscape of sexed categories and the lives lived across them.

While the comparatively recent emergence of the category of sexuality, and its component parts such as lesbian or homosexual, is relatively widely recognized, gender’s history as a category is less often acknowledged. Before delving into Byrne’s world, then, I offer a brief overview of the scholarship that has traced gender’s history and established its forceful, rapid consolidation. Although it has older roots as a linguistic term and, to a lesser extent, as a synonym for sex, gender was a rare term until the mid-twentieth century. The Oxford English Dictionary’s entry for *gender* begins with grammatical gender; its oldest example of usage dates from circa 1390 and involves a person’s name changing from feminine to masculine gender. The use and meaning of the word changed substantially in the twentieth century, coming to mean the ‘state of being male or female as expressed by social or cultural distinctions and differences, rather than biological ones’. The dictionary’s earliest quotation for this usage is 1945, in the *American Journal of Psychology*: ‘In the grade-school years, too, gender (which is the socialized obverse of sex) is a fixed line of demarkation, the qualifying terms being “feminine” and “masculine”.’¹⁸

As important recent scholarship on trans and intersex histories has documented in great detail, gender, in this new sense, first emerged within psychology, where it was used as a way of attempting to distinguish the biological from the social with regard to sex in the context of work on intersex traits in Europe and the United States as well as other settler colonies. In the nineteenth century, debates within embryology and evolution over whether humans began life as sexually

indeterminant led to a focus on the role of hormones and particular types of tissue in determining the shape of an adult person.¹⁹ Sexologists speculated that original physical bisexuality could leave traces which produced inversion in later life.²⁰ By the interwar decades, however, scientists and doctors increasingly sought a stable biological basis for sexual dimorphism, working to understand and manage the relationship between physical and psychological expressions of sex, often in the context of treating and researching intersex and gender non-conforming children and adults.²¹ They began to differentiate more clearly between people who had ‘anomalous’ anatomies and those whose identification with the ‘opposite’ sex was psychological. British doctors in the 1930s and 1940s developed a practice of surgery to confirm ‘psychological sex’ for intersex children, and many of the adults who actually received surgery explicitly defined themselves as intersex, reflecting both the porousness of the boundary between psychological and physical sex in this era and the contemporary landscape of expectations enforced by medical authorities.²² These ideas culminated in the work of psychologist John Money at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore in the 1950s, which solidified the idea of a ‘gender role’ that could be used to guide treatment of intersex children and, in the absence of a discoverable ‘true’ sex defined by hormones, chromosomes, or tissue, would shore up the binary between men and women.²³ As Joanne Meyerowitz put it, ‘a theory of immutable gender identity’ thus emerged in the middle of the twentieth century, replacing the earlier scientific focus on universal human bisexuality.²⁴ In other words, gender identity became the means of reconciling bodily diversity with a binary system in which everyone had to be, finally, either a man or a woman.²⁵

Gender was then taken up and repurposed by second-wave feminists. The feminists – and feminist historians – who took up gender in the 1970s and 1980s sought to use it to break free of rigid norms for men and women.²⁶ In doing so, they penned an alternative origin story for the concept that centred activists rather than scientists – Joan Scott, for example, wrote that “gender” seems to have first appeared among American feminists who wanted to insist on the fundamentally social quality of distinctions based on sex’.²⁷

As used by historians and taught in countless methods courses in history departments, the concept of gender is defined by the work of two scholars in particular: Joan Scott and Judith Butler. In her classic 1986 article, Scott insisted on the fundamental importance of gender, not as an attribute associated with particular categories of people, but as ‘a primary way of signifying relationships of power’.²⁸ Acknowledging the heavy historical symbolic weight of masculinity and femininity, Scott insisted that the work of historians was to challenge a ‘certain timeless quality’ that was too easily assigned to sexual antagonism.²⁹ A scant four years later came Butler’s equally classic *Gender Trouble*, which directly challenged feminism’s reliance on an essentialized category of ‘woman’ and, in the process, developed an argument about gender as produced through repeated acts rather than being reflective of any stable underlying ‘truth’.³⁰

Taken together, Scott’s and Butler’s work is representative of a late-twentieth-century moment in which gender was reconceptualized in order to allow the

category new analytic purchase. That moment proved foundational. These two works remain heavily cited, even as they have been revised and rethought even by their authors. Their core shared conception – gender is a performative mode of expression, but one that participates in the reproduction and articulation of social and cultural norms and hierarchies – remains generative in a wide range of current scholarship. However, perhaps reflecting the category’s own roots in mid-century medicine, the Butler-Scott formulation of gender often figures as a universal category of human experience, something that can be examined at any time or place. Scott argued for a ‘new historical investigation’, the point of which would be ‘to disrupt the notion of fixity, to discover the nature of the debate or repression that leads to the appearance of timeless permanence in binary gender representation’.³¹ Returning to that energy of disrupting fixity requires us to recognize that while Scott’s challenge to the timelessness of a sexed binary has borne abundant fruit, a new fixity has crept in: the idea that gender itself is a timeless category.

Tracing the contingency of gender as a thing, some scholarship loses sight of the contingency of gender as a category. A brief sample – the four articles with ‘gender’ in their titles published in this journal in the last decade – illustrates this point. None of the four asks whether gender is an anachronistic concept, though only one deals with the post-1945 era. Three of the four articles take gender mainly as a means to consider the experiences of women and, in particular, various social or cultural hierarchies that limited or defined their experiences as compared with those of men. They are useful contributions that nonetheless take for granted that past lives can be mapped onto something more or less like a gender binary. Thus Niall Whelehan shows how Irish women in late nineteenth-century Dundee ‘disrupted gender expectations’ through their Land League activism.³² Jack Saunders argues that women’s increased activism within public sector unions in the 1970s ‘reshaped how “class politics” functioned in terms of gender’.³³ And Donald Spaeth details how men and women were prosecuted differently for abusive speech in Elizabethan Norfolk.³⁴ Jane Caplan’s essay on how the Nazi regime dealt with ‘women who were issued with police permits to cross-dress’ is different. It describes in detail another example of the confrontation between a dichotomous system of sex categorization and people whose lives and bodies were not so binary. However, Caplan’s project is ‘to see how sex and gender became entangled in networks of official categorization and bureaucratic transactions’.³⁵ Reckoning with the fact that ‘gender’ as such was only then in the process of being conceptually disentangled from sex might have pushed Caplan to pose different questions about this material – to tease out, for example, how particular ideas about bodies and selves were translated from sexology into state violence.

Muriel St. Clare Byrne’s personal archive offers another possible route through this complex terrain. In what follows, I move through categories of, roughly, bodies, relationships, and Byrne’s own sense of self, in order to develop an argument about how her diverse investments in feminism and living in ‘both her sexes’ become visible through a strategic suspension of the sex/gender/sexuality schema.

At birth, Muriel St. Clare Byrne was physically categorized: the certified copy of the entry in the registrar of births records ‘Girl’ under the category of ‘Sex’.³⁶ Based on incomplete evidence, Byrne’s body probably conformed, more or less, to contemporary expectations about external female morphology.³⁷ A passport, issued in May 1964, records details of Byrne’s physical presence: blue eyes, fair hair, height 5 feet and 3½ inches. It does not record sex, but implies that the default bearer would be male; on Byrne’s passport, the column to record the details relating to the bearer’s wife are simply left blank or crossed out.³⁸ In 1937, her life partner sought advice from a friend about Byrne’s irregular menstruation, receiving the reply that it was quite ordinary for someone in her early forties.³⁹ By her own account, by the Second World War, Byrne had a range of conditions for which she sought medical advice: insomnia, the aftermath of a car accident, ‘chronic fibrocitis [*sic*]. . . slow heart and low blood pressure [and] general glandular deficiency and rheumatism’.⁴⁰

This evidence suggests that, at a minimum, embodiment was always not an easy experience for Byrne, in ways that perhaps resonate with the experiences of other gender non-conforming people.⁴¹ During what has been described as the ‘golden age of endocrinology’, references to ‘general glandular deficiency’ and irregular menstruation could suggest that Byrne wondered, at least, about the possibility of having a body that exceeded or rewrote the usual dimorphic script.⁴² In a time when changes of sex were widely reported and linked with the function of hormones, it’s not impossible that she wondered about the significance of her own ‘glandular deficiency’.⁴³ This remains largely speculation, but I want to underscore how little we generally know about the bodies of historical subjects, and how readily we assume that there is little to be said. Indeed, the possibility of intersex traits, or a physical anatomy that does not conform to a dominant binary sex system, is often overlooked even within trans histories and even in the presence of significant evidence that people were understood by their contemporaries to have physical traits of both sexes.⁴⁴ Assuming that historical figures experienced themselves as having bodies that conformed to their society’s expectations risks overlooking not only the diversity of embodied experiences but also the terms that produce evolving norms about bodies.

In her personal life, Byrne was friends with both men and women; her romantic attachments were exclusively to women, so far as I can discern. She had a lifelong partnership with Marjorie ‘Bar’ Barber. The two met at Somerville College and lived together until Barber’s death in 1976, building a shared household tied not by legal matrimony but by numerous other financial and intimate links. The prevalence of photographs of their pets, and of them with their pets, family-portrait style, as in [figure 1](#), suggest the importance of animals in their household and affective ties. In the rare instances where kinship relations are referred to directly, both Barber and Byrne use feminine terminology. Thus a poem by Barber refers to their cat Michael enjoying ‘two such charming mothers’.⁴⁵ Later, younger human relatives would address them as Aunt Muriel and Aunt Bar.⁴⁶

In the 1930s, Byrne began a romantic relationship with M. A. ‘Susan’ Cullis, who also worked at Bedford College. Byrne’s wills made careful provision for



Fig. 1. Muriel St. Clare Byrne, Marjorie Barber, Timothy White (cat), and Bunter (dog). No date. MSCBC 9/3.

Barber and also, to a lesser extent, for Cullis.⁴⁷ Letters from both women make clear that their relationships with Byrne were romantic, grounded in love, shared domesticity, and physical intimacy. In the early 1940s, Byrne tried various strategies to unite the three of them into a household unit; although that effort failed, they remained closely involved in each other's lives for decades.⁴⁸ In a short story that Barber wrote about marriage and infidelity during the Blitz, she rewrote this triangle in heterosexual terms, with herself as the ambivalent wife and Byrne transformed into 'Bernard', a rather self-centred husband who embarks on an affair but finds he longs for his wife after a bout of influenza.⁴⁹ Such a re-writing undoubtedly made the story more publishable, but it also suggests a readiness to cast Byrne in a masculine role with minimal changes of name and pronoun.

What about self-understanding? Byrne used the terms girl and woman about herself and was referred to in all formal and professional correspondence as Miss Byrne or Miss St. Clare Byrne. In other ways, Byrne distanced herself from the category of woman. When she and Sayers were writing the play *Busman's Honeymoon*, Barber read drafts and offered opinions, which Sayers took seriously, while Byrne was more offhand. Sharing one of Barber's criticisms, Byrne distanced herself from it, suggesting that it was a reflection of the popularity of the character of Lord Peter Wimsey rather than a genuine issue: 'I only mentioned it to illustrate the way in which your female fans are all "mad about the boy"', she said, quoting the title of Noel Coward's popular 1932 song.⁵⁰ Significant for this article is the way the phrasing wobbles between trans identification and misogyny: in what sense is Barber a *female* fan while Byrne is not?

Byrne’s photographs provide visual evidence of masculine self-fashioning.⁵¹ As a student at Somerville College, Byrne wore her hair short and dressed sensibly. Casual snapshots document a preference for tweeds and sturdy clothing, whether skirts or trousers, as well as a tendency to interact with animals, whether cats, dogs, or sheep. In figures 2 and 3, Byrne poses with an old woman and then with a sheep, wearing a practical skirt that suggests a long walking holiday. In figure 4, Byrne wears a jacket, collared shirt, tie, and trousers while handling a somewhat reluctant cat. Figure 5 shows Byrne wears a sailing outfit – possibly a costume for a fancy-dress party, perhaps also clothing that once belonged to her grandfather, a naval architect. She is smoking, looking directly at the camera, and holding a confident stance – all markers of masculinity and modernity. These photographs situate Byrne in a playful, intellectual, modernist milieu; they prove decisively that she did not follow in the footsteps of either her dandy father or her traditional mother in terms of fashion; and they suggest that, although masculine clothing was increasingly associated with lesbianism in the wake of the 1928 obscenity trial over Radclyffe Hall’s novel *The Well of Loneliness*, Byrne didn’t change her appearance very much, if at all.⁵²

By the time Byrne was an established author – well-respected enough to earn an O.B.E. in 1955 – she was deliberately creating a professional image that walked a careful line in terms of sex. Writing to her solicitor in 1968, she suggested that a tax inspector ought to ‘realise that I am not what they describe as an “authoress” but a writer, scholar and editor’, rejecting the feminized title



Fig. 2. Muriel St. Clare Byrne on a walking holiday, circa 1926. MSCBC 9/3.



Fig. 3. Muriel St. Clare Byrne on a walking holiday, circa 1926. MSCBC 9/3.



Fig. 4. Muriel St. Clare Byrne and cat. No date. MSCBC 9/2.



Fig. 5. Muriel St. Clare Byrne in sailor's costume. No date. MSCBC 9.

‘authoress’ to claim these neutral, and implicitly more serious, terms. On the other hand, she argued that the cost of maintaining the physical appearance of being a professional woman ought to be counted as a business expense for tax purposes. For example, the cost of getting her hair done: ‘most professional women have their hair done every week or ten days, and it was very obvious at the British Drama League Council meeting I attended last Thursday that I was the only woman present who had not had it done!’⁵³ Here, Byrne names herself unambiguously as a woman, albeit one whose only reason for professional hair-styling is in order not to look disreputable at the British Drama League council meeting – a performance of professional womanhood, perhaps, undertaken with minimal conviction.



Fig. 6. Contact sheet. No date. MSCBC 9/3.

In the same letter, Byrne explained her approach to professional clothing. She had bought ‘a good undateable evening dress in 1955’, the year she got an O.B.E., which she said ‘should see me through the few years left’. This, evidently, was rarely worn, having endured for thirteen years already. Meanwhile, ‘for daily wear I always have what is known as a “classic” tailor-made suit which is also undateable and perfectly adequate’.⁵⁴ A single evening dress, but a series of suits, always to hand. Byrne was professionally photographed in this clothing. A contact sheet (figure 6) from the session suggests the iterative posing required to convey the image of professional writer, scholar, and editor. Figure 7 features



Fig. 7. Muriel St. Clare Byrne in evening dress with dog. No date. MSCBC 9/3.

the evening dress (shown to best advantage, of course, when posing with a dog). Dark, offering full coverage, it has a drape that is reminiscent of classical statuary. Many more of the photographs in the archive feature Byrne in the tailored suit. In [figure 8](#), we see the suit – broad lapels, pinstripe, dark tie with tie pin – as Byrne holds, this time, a book in her lap.

Not always at ease with existing ways of organizing sex, reproduction, and social roles, Byrne lived a life between categories, in communities of friends and colleagues who rendered her existence legible and possible. From that base she elaborated, in her memoir and other writing, a powerful counter-narrative of sex and development that made visible a different entanglement of what would be disaggregated, in the second half of the twentieth century, into sex, gender, and sexuality. *Common or Garden Child* does not mention Freud directly, but it can be read within a context in which ideas drawn from psychoanalysis – particularly the Oedipus complex and the unconscious – circulated freely.⁵⁵ In his response to Byrne’s draft (quoted at the opening of this article), Harold Child invoked the notion of human bisexuality, or the ability of human beings to encompass more than one sex. For many early sexologists, this was a way to theorize the variety of



Fig. 8. Muriel St. Clare Byrne in suit. No date. MSCBC 9/3.

sexed expressions found in real life.⁵⁶ But over the course of Byrne's adulthood, psychoanalytic theories cast human bisexuality as both universal and developmental. In other words, they argued that the normal course of development was toward identification with a single sex and romantic attraction to the opposite sex.⁵⁷ This happened, moreover, through a process of intense psychic interaction with mothers and fathers (or their symbolic stand-ins), in which girls recognized that they lacked a penis (or phallus) and shifted their desire from their mothers to their fathers.⁵⁸

Common or Garden Child elaborates a very different trajectory, while drawing on methods and concepts drawn from popular ideas of psychoanalysis. The methodology of the book could be described as an exercise in self-analysis – standing in contrast to the earlier genre of sexological case-study echoed by works such as *The Well of Loneliness*.⁵⁹ Byrne is deliberate and cautious in her memory-work. She finds that more details return to her as she spends time with her memories, but she is careful to test what can be properly remembered and what cannot. Dreams are discussed, but more than that, the overall effect of the prose is dream-like, a submersion in Byrne's own sense-memories and impressions as they come into focus and then dissolve again against the limits of time and distance. This is not only an exploration of a self: it is also a consideration of the porous boundaries of that self. In the opening pages, for example, Byrne confronts the problem of separating the self from others by dividing 'memory, with its treacherous deposit from other minds', from 'the sense-vision', in which:

the experience is seen and felt, not remembered, but timeless. At first the stream is troubled, thick with the sediment of other people's recollections.

I remember much: but I see nothing. On the morning of the day after Queen Victoria’s death it clears, and I begin to see.⁶⁰

The quest to rediscover her past self is always caught up in the sediment of other people.

Ultimately, the memoir narrates a coming into adulthood in which ‘girl’ is never the only thing Byrne is, and in which being a ‘boy’ functions as a kind of constant simultaneous alternative, both completely present and utterly impossible.⁶¹ In place of a standard Oedipal narrative, she describes identifying closely with her father and grandfather – not because she envies them their relationships to her mother or grandmother, but because she sees herself as part of their world. She wants to act as they do and to have the things they have – the book dwells lovingly on an Edwardian masculine material culture of flashy clothing and well-made tools – and, to a large extent, she gets what she wants.

This is a process that happens in relationship. Byrne writes that her grandfather likes to call her Toby.⁶² This is not, however, because he thinks she *is* a boy, but rather because he *treats her* as a boy; her boyhood is relational and contingent rather than essential and universal, in this telling. Dismissing the company of adult female relatives, she rejects the claim of one aunt that:

I am ‘just like a boy’. This is nonsense. I am not just like a boy. I wish I were, because then I should have nicer clothes, and short hair, and a school cap, and a striped blazer.

Instead, she turns to her father and grandfather, who ‘prefer girls to boys’ and who ‘give me all the things that boys have, and some of the things that only men have’.⁶³

In a photograph from this era of her life (figure 9), Byrne poses with her father and grandfather. True to her descriptions, her father (far left) is stylish in high, stiff collar and a checked cap, a vague smile on his lips. Her grandfather (centre) looks more conservative, befitting a serious-minded naval designer. He holds a very young Muriel in his arms. She has some of the signifiers of girlhood (long hair, a skirt) but these are understated; her hair, for example, looks windblown rather than carefully prepared. She wears a sailor suit and cap, unremarkable clothing for a late Victorian or Edwardian child, but also a neat echo of her attachment to her grandfather and his professional expertise.

In a cultural context in which full adulthood was accorded primarily to white men, being a girl who claimed adult male competence was a particularly potent move. Byrne remembered that she could ‘do the things boys can do’, often better, because at home ‘I have to satisfy adult male standards, unsparingly applied to my endeavours to run, jump, climb and throw, to play games, to use penknives, to draw straight lines, and to use machinery of any kind for its proper purpose’.⁶⁴ Byrne describes the tools that her grandfather, a yacht designer, has given her, paying special attention to ‘the most beautiful little hammer in the world’,

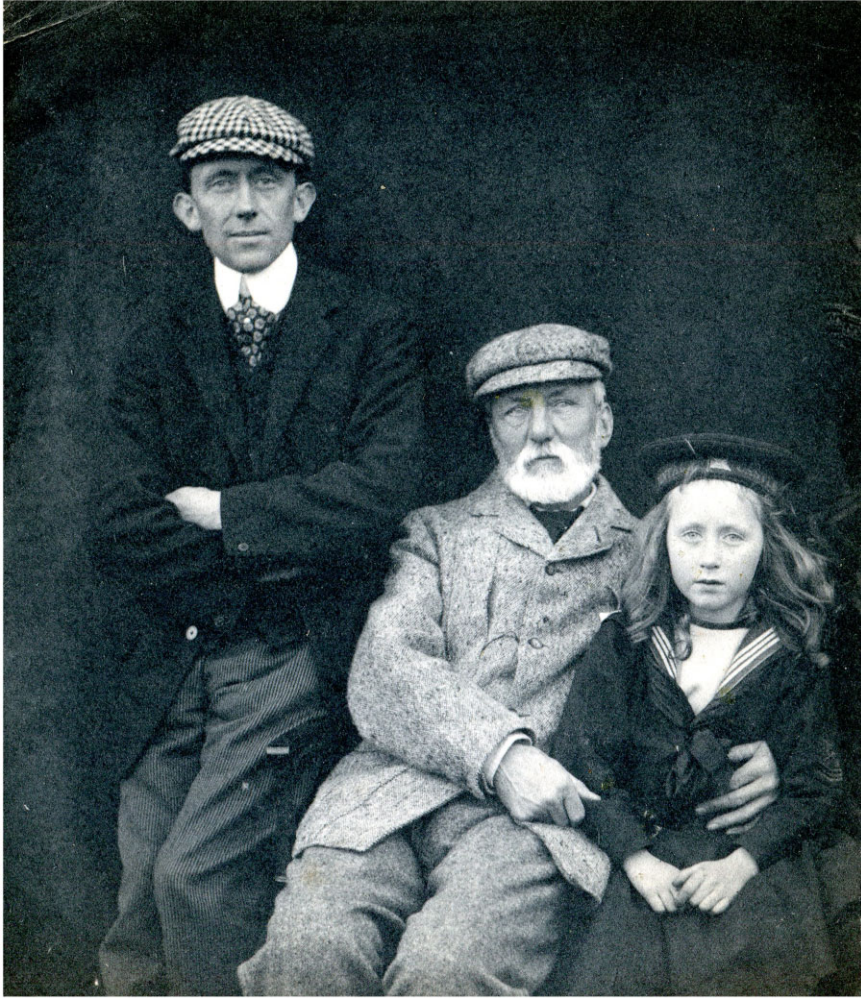


Fig. 9. Muriel St. Clare Byrne with her father and grandfather. No date. MSCBC 9/1.

a watchmaker's hammer with 'a delicate shaft, and a steel head that is quite different in shape from that of any ordinary hammer'.⁶⁵ Her grandfather initiates her into a lineage of men; the small, precious, hammer is a metaphor for Byrne herself, valued as a distinctive member of a highly masculine family unit.

Contemporary readers of *Common or Garden Child* noticed its emphasis on relationships in the making of selfhood. Novelist E. M. Delafield wrote that Byrne's father and grandfather 'treated her as they might have treated an active and intelligent little boy'. Only someone of her generation, she went on, 'can fully realise what this meant of privilege, expansion and naturalness, by comparison with the cramped and artificial existence imposed on even the most indulgently-treated little girls'.⁶⁶ But was Byrne a product of her father's and grandfather's

decision to treat her differently, or were they reacting to some perceived, innate difference within Byrne – whether that was about sex or genius or something else? An unsigned review in the *Times Literary Supplement* asked this question outright: ‘would she ever have had all these freedoms conferred on her if she had been ordinary?’⁶⁷

Returning to the notion of non-binary methodology, I draw on Karen Barad’s concept of intra-action to escape this circle. Neither exterior context nor an interior, innate self takes precedence, but instead they produce one another in an evolving feedback loop.⁶⁸ Such an approach resonates with recent writing by trans authors and scholars who refuse to assign their identities to either nature or nurture. In a beautiful essay on migration and transition, for example, the writer Masha Gessen has described a sense of splitting, as though they have possible versions of themselves living out lives in different places. The self that stayed in the United States from adolescence, perhaps, undertook medical transition right away; the self that never left Russia, perhaps, still identifies as a woman. They underscore the ‘choicefulness’ of life, but also the radical contingency of one’s own self, remade by migrations which both are and are not a matter of personal decision.⁶⁹

Byrne rejected her aunt’s claim that she was *just like* a boy. Did she, however, want to be a boy? A story written in childhood suggests that the answer was, sometimes at least, yes. In the story, Byrne writes: “‘I wish I was a boy,’” sighed Tommy (as she was called); “‘Geoffrey goes to a ripping school about three miles away from my school.’”⁷⁰ From the vantage point of adulthood, Byrne remembers this desire in a more complicated way, as part of the process of coming to understand what is possible and what isn’t:

I can never change my size, like Alice in Wonderland (though I believe that I can alter the shape of my chin by thinking hard enough when I want to look more determined) . . . I shall never be beautiful, because I am just ordinary to look at, like practically every other person I know (but it is possible to imagine that I shall wake up one morning and find I have turned into a boy).⁷¹

Size and beauty are immutable; chins and, just possibly, sex might be altered – by determination or by the magic fulfilment of a dream. This passage is significant because it is a rare moment of reflection about actually changing sex; although the mechanism remains mysterious and the framing consigns it to a child’s dream, it is nonetheless a record of imagining transition.

The psychoanalytic model hinges on a girl realizing she is not like her brothers or her father. Byrne accounts instead for her realization that she is not like other girls. As a very young child, she wanted to go to fancy-dress parties as the Knave of Hearts, but found her desire to be inexpressible. ‘It mattered so much that I was never able to bring myself to tell anybody about it.’ As a result, her friends went to these parties in casual drag, dressed up their brothers’ outfits, while ‘I, whose chief delight and amusement was to dress up as a boy on every possible occasion, was invariably despatched to them rigged out as a fairy, and unkindly

handicapped with a pair of idiotic tinsel wings and a revolting star-tipped wand!’⁷² The link between the term ‘fairy’ and an effeminate or transfeminine man gives Byrne, in this narration, an air of butch outrage; the tinsel wings are drag to her, as the sailor suits and boys’ pyjamas are to her female friends.⁷³ Later, she compares herself with her friend Helen and states directly: ‘She does not want to be a boy as I do, and it does not amuse her to dress up as one.’⁷⁴

If Byrne were a boy, her emerging sense of difference would be unremarkable. Instead, she is tormented by the future woman she is supposed to become, as she grows older and realizes that her place in the society of men is temporary and contingent. She allows the reader of the memoir to recognize that her father uses her as an excuse to continue acting like a child – flicking cannonballs made of bread across the dinner table, for example.⁷⁵ But she is never allowed to appropriate all her father’s adult mannerisms, such as his masculine slang – he warns her not to let her grandfather hear her calling clergymen ‘sky-pilots’ for



Fig. 10. Muriel St. Clare Byrne with her mother. No date. MSCBC 9/1.

example.⁷⁶ She follows her father into a ‘world of checks [on suits] and music-halls, clubs and offices, club-stewards, golf-pros., and barmaids’, where ladies are intruders, but she has entry only ‘in rather the same way that the large Clumber spaniel, attached permanently to my father’s heels, has it’.⁷⁷

Byrne’s father died in 1905, an event which she chooses not to address in her memoir directly. But as the memoir proceeds towards adolescence, it records both widening vistas and the threat of the expectations of being a respectable adult woman. [Figure 10](#), perhaps taken around this time, situates Byrne firmly in a feminine mode. Hair in ringlets, her white frock is the childish version of her mother’s gown; even their bracelets echo each other. The logic of this photograph is that Byrne will become her mother, as the logic of [figure 9](#) positions Byrne as the natural heir to her paternal grandfather. Which would it be?

Turning to literature and drama as an adolescent, Byrne chooses roles for herself – after seeing *The Scarlet Pimpernel*, she ‘lived Sir Percy, morning, noon and night.’ Occasionally she agrees to play the villain, to let someone else have ‘a turn with the hero’, but she refused to be the heroine. ‘I could woo with ardour, but I drew the line at being wooed.’⁷⁸ Her juvenile stories had almost exclusively male casts: ‘The only thing I could do with wives and daughters was to hurry them away under escort – a procedure at once correct and convenient, as it left me plenty of elbow-room for horses, trapdoors, match-locks, secret passages and guard-chambers.’⁷⁹ This is a kind of disidentification. Making adventure stories for boys her own, she carefully stage-manages the departure of female characters: she doesn’t simply leave wives and daughters out, but invents a series of trapdoors, secret passages, and so on to escort them from the scene of action, as though devising her own future escape from heterosexual femininity.⁸⁰

As she grows older, the pressures toward appropriate adult female behaviour increase. Her mother wants her to ask for poetry and novels for her birthday, not ‘Henty and things like *The Story of British Engineering*’, which she’ll soon outgrow.⁸¹ Byrne begins to doubt her own preferences. She’s chosen, as a school bag, ‘a boy’s satchel, of beautiful brown leather . . . coveted for years, eventually achieved. . . . But do I, now, really want to go on using my boy’s satchel? It is different from everyone else’s.’⁸² In conflict with her family, she hides in books and grows angry at the capricious approach taken to her. ‘Where do I belong?’ she wonders. ‘I must find a way of life that is my own, that is centred in itself.’⁸³ Education offers the way forward. Byrne records overhearing a discussion about a ‘lady-doctor’ who is described as ‘ridiculous’ – she ‘won’t get any patients’ – but she also notes that her new, bigger, all-girl school, which is ‘almost like a school story’, has ‘a lady with an M.A. degree who teaches the top classes’.⁸⁴ The book ends with her enrolling at a girls’ high school, a kind of salvation that her mother, a former schoolteacher, can rejoice in, too: ‘this is her own youth – the things she loved – the things she gave up when she married my father.’⁸⁵

How should we interpret this ending? A reviewer in the *Liverpool Daily Post* situated Byrne’s memoir in a narrative about the emergence of the New Woman. Having practiced masculine pursuits as a child, she could, as an adult, avail herself of the new arenas now opened to young women. The reviewer argued: ‘Girls like

the young Miss St. Clare Byrne were still a little unexpected in the Edwardian era, but there are more of them now, and in the days to come their name will be legion. One hopes they won't all prefer to chisels to needles!⁸⁶ The point about preferring chisels to needles is a telling coda: it domesticates the 'new girl' via that most traditional of feminine traits, namely, having a preference for needlework. The 'New Woman' and, by implication, Byrne are thus immediately rescued, by this reviewer, from the category of the female invert, who, as sexologist Havelock Ellis famously opined, is marked by a 'dislike and sometimes incapacity for needlework and other domestic occupations'.⁸⁷

By the 1930s and 1940s, however, new ideas were coming to the fore which made the debate over the New Woman and her masculinity rather outdated. Instead, the focus was on how processes of physical and emotional development produced normative men and women – and what had gone wrong when they did not. Superficially, Byrne's memoir offers an ending that seems to conform to the Oedipal narrative by allowing her to identify with her mother and enter the category of female at last. Placing the memoir in the larger context of Byrne's life, however, I argue that it is in fact a thorough rewriting of the Oedipal drama. Rather than a psychosexual path of unconscious development that brings an end to infant bisexuality, Byrne traces, via her own semi-conscious memories, a complex negotiation between her parents' identities and her own, in which she emerges scathed and cautious but still in full possession of both of her sexes. It points toward a road not taken, in which psychology and medicine did not become so concerned with disentangling sexuality from sex, and biological from social, and physical from psychological – a road that might have led to a different sort of gender.

There's a hint of this in Byrne's writing, in which she, like later feminist writers, takes up sexed social roles as an especially useful analytic device for challenging structural sexism and patriarchal violence. Writing in 1941 about plans being made for the postwar world, Byrne argued forcefully that ignoring the views and needs of women was wrong-headed and short-sighted. If 'the social group described as women' is dissatisfied with the plans for postwar society, those plans were doomed to fail. This is a significant phrase: Byrne suggests that women as a group are called into being by description, rather than pre-existing as a natural, inevitable category. We must, Byrne went on, 'accept the basic fact that men and women are equally and essentially and primarily human beings'. If women truly only wanted 'a husband and a baby, there would be no need for this mass suggestion, for the pressure, the blackmail, and the anti-feminist outcries and uproar.' She cited evidence from psychology that both men and women had masculine and feminine elements, and concluded with a quotation from a 1910 play by Harley Granville-Barker that riffed on Genesis: 'Male and female created He them: but men and women are a long time in the making.'⁸⁸ In this short passage, Byrne bridges the early twentieth century notions of essential bisexuality and the mid-twentieth-century turn toward social roles as a way to explain the binary division of people who are not, physically or mentally, so neatly categorizable.

Approaching Muriel St. Clare Byrne’s archive with what I have been calling a non-binary methodology allows other ways of ordering the world to come into view. In her life and her work, we can see gender, as a category, in the making, but we can also see a few of the complex ways that people such as Byrne picked up, remade, and were sometimes erased by other emerging theories of what became sex, gender, and sexuality.⁸⁹

A reader of an early version of this work asked, in essence, wasn’t Byrne just a lesbian in a suit? The question, I think, is symptomatic of the precisely the historical impasse that this article aims to break through. Although she wore suits and had romantic and domestic partnerships with women, Byrne expressed no understanding of herself as a lesbian in a suit, any more than she described herself as transsexual or intersex. Had she used the terminology of her era, she might have described herself as an invert, a concept that immediately confounds the separation between sexuality and gender that ‘lesbian in a suit’ tries to maintain, especially as it is paired, implicitly with what this reader thought she was not – which is trans. Claiming Byrne as a lesbian in a suit insists rather anxiously on a particular kind of ancestral genealogy, one that privileges identity founded on sexuality and assumes a stable sexed body to anchor it. In other words, it assumes our sex/gender/sexuality epistemology, and then insists that sex (woman) and sexuality (lesbian) are paramount, with gender (that suit) a mere performance or expression. This is the world of Butler and Scott; it is not the world of Muriel St. Clare Byrne. Viewed another way, asking whether Byrne *would now be* a butch lesbian, or a trans man, or a non-binary person, takes for granted that there is a stable entity called ‘Muriel St. Clare Byrne’ who could be excised from her contexts and transplanted to ours – who could, in other words, undertake time travel and reveal herself as belonging one of our contemporary categories.⁹⁰ Byrne recognized the entanglement of past and present that I have tried to carry throughout this article; she opened her six-volume edited collection *The Lisle Letters* (1981) with an epigraph from Kenneth Clark: ‘History is ourselves.’⁹¹ But history is also unfamiliar; if it is ourselves, it is sometimes a part of ourselves we no longer fully recognize. As we evolve, too, what we recognize changes; what counts as ‘radical alterity’ now is not what it was twenty years ago, or will be twenty years hence.

I have suggested that gender has come to function too smoothly as a category of analysis that moves across time and space. By contrast, a defining feature of the category ‘trans’ as it functions in the twenty-first century is novelty: trans people and trans ideas are continuously defined and re-defined as brand-new in spite of evidence to the contrary. Ruth Pearce and Francis Ray White document, for example, that multiple different men have been hailed as the ‘first pregnant man’ in the British and international press over the last three decades, while Alan Hart and Michael Dillon (among others) compete in scholarship for the dubious title of the first trans (or, to borrow from the title of one book on Dillon, ‘man-made’) man.⁹² The title of Rachel Mesch’s recent book, *Before Trans: Three Gender Stories from Nineteenth-Century France*, captures the distinction neatly. Even though in the book itself Mesch argues that her subject is also “gender before gender,” because gender did not exist in nineteenth-century

France as a phenomenon separate from biology’, the title reveals the field’s larger assumptions: trans emerged at a particular time and place, but ‘gender stories’ can be found everywhere.⁹³

Is gender still a useful category of analysis? In a world where people use opposition to ‘gender studies’, ‘genderism’ or ‘gender theory’ in order to undermine rights for queer and trans folks and constrain the lives of gender non-conforming people, the answer can only be: yes.⁹⁴ The foundational work of Joan Scott and Judith Butler, and others in the broad church of gender studies, pushes in the opposite direction, toward liberation and possibility. The power of this work was in the way that it picked up a diagnostic term – which had originated as an effort to patch up a fraying medical theory of sexual dimorphism – and used it to tease apart naturalized assumptions about what it meant to be male or female. Building on that impulse, I have argued, here, for a practice of holding ‘gender’ self-consciously, as a contingent category with its own heavy historical baggage, while continuing to allow it to open new questions and perspectives on past lives that operated according to other logics. One such life was Byrne’s own – a life that she lived within both her sexes, a life that she narrated through a rewriting of psychosexual development, and a life that is, as a result, one ancestor of the non-binary present.

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

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9 This chimes with Greta LaFleur’s point: ‘Why, then, eschew contemporary vocabularies for describing trans histories? Because, I would argue, it makes it harder to perceive some of the unique and, at times, long-gone ways of making sense of gender plurality that existed in the centuries before us. It also tends to circumscribe and even delimit what we are able to imagine, recognize, or identify as trans history.’ LaFleur, ‘Epilogue: Against Consensus’, pp. 370–1.

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