Julia Pastrana’s Beard: Fortifying the Gender Binary in Victorian England
I die happy; I know I have been loved for myself (Miles, 1974, p. 10).

Obsessive attention is paid to a dying person’s last utterance. Funerals are often the site of the quotes repeated for a group of people, where others repeat these words communally to remember the dead. As dubious it might be, a crowd of aristocratic sightseers have claimed that the quote above was Julia Pastrana’s last words from her deathbed. Although it could have been a product of journalistic license, her often much-quoted dying words have appeared in different articles (Miles, 1974; Bondeson, 1997). The last words, according to Gopnik (2009), reflect a “desire to show that what one said was an essential to the meaning of one’s life as were his orders and actions” (p. 29). Then, the words of Pastrana leave much for explanations. Claiming to have been loved for herself, variously known as dog-woman, bearded lady, ape-faced, or simply the nondescript, Pastrana has been probed for centuries for reinterpretations.

In this essay, I examine the meanings of Julia Pastrana’s sex/gender identity in Victorian England. What did Pastrana signify in the historical context of Victorian England? How was she culturally accepted in terms of sex/gender binary? To put it simply, “what” was she? I argue that the confusion around Pastrana’s existence fortified the rigid notion of sex/gender binary through the process of enfreakment.

Gender Complication/Fortification

Julia Pastrana was known to be born in 1834 in Mexico. Recruited by Theodore Lent, an entrepreneur trading atypical human beings as public entertainment, Pastrana began her career in 1854. She was publicly exhibited in the United States, Canada and Europe in the 1850s being one of the most famous curiosities of her time (Garland Thomson, 1996). She performed as a singer and a dancer in elaborate costumes. Quickly becoming a success, on July 1857, Julia Pastrana made her debut in London as the “Wonder of the World” (The Illustrated London News, July 1857, p. 15). After her death during her tour in Moscow, Pastrana was embalmed by a
Russian professor Sukolov of Moscow University. In the same year, Lent bought the two bodies back from the professor after he realized that Sukolov was exhibiting the embalmed bodies². In 1862, one of the most famous extraordinary bodies once again appeared in London: dead and embalmed.

The significance of Pastrana lays both in alive/dead states as she was the most famous freak of the time. Garland Thomson (1996 & 1999) argues that Pastrana complicated five different categories of binary notions: human/animal, civilized/primitive, normal/pathological, self/other and male/female oppositions. She carefully ties the binaries stressing how Pastrana’s body confused “the orthodox categories of being upon which the social structure was hung” (Garland Thomson, 1999, p. 90). The appearance of Pastrana’s face and body was associated with an animal because of the shape of her head and hair, which then signified the categories of primitive and pathological. Automatically, these categories are then associated with the “other,” because spectators observed the embodiment of error in her body differentiating themselves from Pastrana. Thus, Garland Thomson (1996 & 1999) argues that the display of her body fueled public anxieties about unstable identity categories. Garland Thomson’s analyses are limited to Victorian American context, but LaCom (2008) asserts in a similar fashion for Victorian England. She argues that the freak shows complicated sex and gender binaries in Victorian England. She also stresses the confusion that the spectators felt represented ideological anxieties about strict and natural divisions.

Here, I offer an alternative reading of Julia Pastrana’s identity presentation with the emphasis on sex/gender binaries in the mid-1800s Victorian England. Although Pastrana’s body offers various interpretations in other categories, the Victorian context of the relationship between facial hair and gender is noteworthy since gender fortification bore important social
meanings. The naturalness of her facial hair complicated the notion of biological sex and gender, but the presentation of her identity was carefully constructed to fortify the social construction of sex/gender. With the embodiment of error and awe, I argue that Pastrana’s case reifies the binary because she was punished by not being one or the other.

**Enfreakment**

The process of enfreakment, Garland Thomson (1999) states, was how Pastrana was stripped of all subjectivity to blur the binaries. According to Hevey in *Freakery*, the process of “enfreakment” emerges from “cultural rituals that stylize, silence, differentiate, and distance the persons whose bodies the freak-hunters or the showmen colonize and commercialize” (Garland Thomson, 1996, p. 10). None of the bodily qualities of freaks often fits neatly into categories and borders. Disregarding the “other” as a part of the cultural system, or rather, accepting a “freak” as a social component is enfreakment (Garland Thomson, 1996). Enfreakment, thus, is enculturation of freaks by reconstituting the category of freak as general deviances of bodies in which we assumed of freaks of nature.

Pastrana’s beard had uncertain origins which were denied by the society’s establishment and assertion of subjectivity. LaCom (2008) asserts that a hairy woman’s body was inexplicable and irreconcilable with what people knew about men and women because it was an ambivalent and contradictory image that exemplified abjection. Here, I expand the notion of enfreakment as a form of social policing in Victorian England. Pastrana’s body not only signified the collapses of differences into freakery to attract and scare the ordinary, but also made use of enfreakment. Meaning, the cultural process of enfreakment, whether intended or not, served a purpose of fortifying appropriate public standards. The element of attraction was normal people’s curiosity to observe the error—involvement of both femininity and masculinity—which Pastrana
exemplified. Furthermore, because people trusted what they saw, and when they saw Pastrana’s face covered with hair, despite her breasts, despite her frilly dress and lilting voice, they were “confounded, amazed and drawn to stare despite themselves and despite the anxiety which she provoked” (Stern, 2008, p. 211). At the same time, the fear that Pastrana’s body created had to be eliminated through this process. The way of coping with complication was to offer strict presentations of the binary. The freak body needed to be eliminated from the normalcy in order to fortify the social norms; the possibility that a shaky dichotomy provided was never to be permitted thus had to be categorized into an unexplainable eccentricity.

How the Freak Fortifies

Fortification of gender, according to Felsenthal (2005), happens through regulatory processes, such as medical intervention, psychological diagnoses, and media interpretation. In Pastrana’s case, facial hair was used as a normalizing process; scientific medical understanding of Pastrana’s beard was regarded as a male trait whereas the feminine presentation of Pastrana was carefully mediated through enfreakment in order not to disturb the status quo. The naturalness of her beard was seen as an error in social consensus, fortifying Pastrana’s gender as a collective social norm. It represented the struggle to achieve general fortification of the ideological sex/gender distinction rather than depiction of anxieties. Categorized as extraordinary, not to be confused or coincided with normal quotidian of the Victorian people, the bearded lady was employed as a popular entertainment. The ultimate presentation of what not to be, the discussions of medical examination and media interpretation are useful in the case of Pastrana.

Medical Understanding

Discourses regarding the “errors” that Pastrana embodied were often presented in the most prestigious medical journal at the time: the Lancet. Above all, medical examination of
Pastrana’s body and interpretations offered by the examiners present the relationship between the notions of sex/gender in Victorian England. The general medical discourse of female hirsuteness dates back to the ancient Greece. Hippocrates mentioned women’s ability to grow beards after menopause. It was a well-recognized fact that removal or cessation of functional generative apparatus would make women hairier (Poovey, 1988). Thus, excessiveness of hair was not all rare. It was “where” hair was situated. Pastrana’s face and the presence of hair, therefore, exemplified a binary complication in medicine. Despite the confusion, medical records successfully classified Pastrana’s gender. According to the journal entry in the *Lancet*, Pastrana was identified as a woman;

Main peculiarity consists in her possessing hairs nearly all over the body and more especially on those parts which are ordinarily clothed with hairs in the male sex [...] she has a large tuft of hair depending from the chin—a beard, continuous with smaller growths on the upper lip and cheeks—a moustache and whiskers [...] in this respect she agrees, in an exaggerated degree, with what is not very uncommonly observed in the male sex (Laurence, 1857, p. 48).

Hairiness here is marked as that of a man; Laurence also noted that Pastrana herself admitted what she had was a male trait. Although Garland Thomson (1999) offers an interpretation that this gendered reading of her body casts as a hermaphrodite figure creating confusion, rather I argue, this is an example of a clear-cut binary. Socially, Pastrana does not belong to one binary because she possesses both womanly and manly characteristics. However, because in-betweeness is impermissible, it was necessary to find the signifier of “sex” before the judgment. Only after the correct assignment of sex was she allowed to be probed for her “peculiarity.” The depiction above clearly assigns a gender identity to genetic sex traits. “Peculiarity” of her body is due to the possession of dual traits of femininity and masculinity: female organs and full breasts for the former and facial hair for the latter. If Pastrana’s beard were to be removed in order to claim her
“true” sex/gender identity, she loses her uniqueness to be exhibited as a freak. Although there is no medical “elimination” or “intervention” of what confuses the sex/gender identity, such as castration of genitals of a hermaphrodite baby, Pastrana is “socially” neutered through the process of enfreakment. She is not explicitly to be seen as a woman in her exhibition; rather, she becomes the object of “other” to remind the viewers of what not to be affirming her enfreakment’s ability to strengthen the gender binary.

Advertise Me

Another means of gender fortification is media interpretation and presentation. As the prime mode of presentation, the enfreakment process in print advertisements rejected and reified the gender assignment of Pastrana. The problem with labeling freaks was deciding on the right categories that would provoke the interest the most. Thus, advertisements were phrased to invoke curiosity and still reinforce a set idea of the binary. The success of Pastrana’s show depended upon how successfully the advertisements could pique the interests of the audiences to her presentation. Thus, the description of her show was in close relation to what was socially popular at the time. With the need of establishing a strong image of masculinity as an important social and cultural issue, enfreakment of Pastrana was not only closely related to gender but also to a supporting evidence of error embodiment. The typical advertisements for Pastrana’s performance follow:

THE NONDESCRIPT.—Grand and Novel Attraction—Miss JULIA PASTRANA, the Nondescript, known throughout the United States and Canada as the BEAR WOMAN, where she has held her Levees in all the principal Cities, and created the greatest possible excitement, being pronounced by most eminent Naturalists and Physicians the Wonder of the World […] (The Illustrated London News, July 4, 1857, p.15).
The print advertisements ran on the newspapers of London such as the *Times* and the *Illustrated London News* described Pastrana as the “nondescript.” The literal definition of nondescript, according to Merrian-Webster dictionary, is “belonging or appearing to be no particular class or kind: not easily described” and “lacking distinctive or interesting qualities.” Pastrana, according to Garland Thomson (2003), did not lack distinctive qualities, rather, she possessed too many interesting features. Similarly, she did not “belong to a particular kind,” neither men nor women. Thus, this narrative was reinforcement of the freak element. It was to describe Pastrana as an object of complication to ensure her popularity whereas in reality, describing her as the nondescript, a form and a figure of foreign, and a pathological unknown creature had fortified the binaries of the social gender norms. The enactment of biased and curious spectatorship only strengthened the social constructs.

The process of enfreakment embodied both fear and attraction for the normal; reading the word “nondescript” as rejection, assignment of a gender category was affiliation to include the freaks within the social order. Expanding what Stern (2008) suggested, thus, enfreakment was a social process to include Pastrana who had the potential to complicate the gender binary. Since enfreakment practice was culturally acceptable, gender identity categorization was necessary outside of the realm of freaks, such as in medical discourse. Still, on a subliminal level, media interpretation shows that Pastrana was assumed of a gender identity as a member of the group. Incorporation of the in-betweenness without disturbing the gender binary was successful through enfreakment which in turn, served the role of gender fortification.

Ontological existence of biological sex difference was apparent in the case of Pastrana’s enfreakment. Certain biological characteristics were understood as feminine. For instance, the
Regent Gallery handbill of the 1857 exhibition in London gives us a more detailed presentation of her identity:

This curious and very interesting little lady[...] has thick black hair upon the nose, forehead, and every part of her face and person; excepting the front of the neck, hands, and feet; [...] she has very pretty whiskers, beard, and moustache; [...] her form and limbs are quite perfect, with wonderfully small hands and feet. Altogether Miss Julia is the most singular, curious, and pleasing specimen of humanity in the world, and will entertain her audiences by dancing

THE HIGHLAND FLING,
AND SINGING
ENGLISH AND SPANISH ROMANCES


Apart from assigning her the female gender and noting womanly traits, such as small limbs, the overall style of writing is very favorable toward Pastrana. It was designed to regard Pastrana as a delight and enjoyment, not as an object of a threat. She performed in a graceful gesture and a sweet voice: traditional feminine characteristics. People were supposed to be charmed as much as repulsed. This tactic of affiliation in turn emphasized the complicated nature of Pastrana’s presentation as a freak, embodying both characteristics of sex/gender. However, she still did not offer a representation of the hirsute woman that expanded the parameters of social acceptability of enfreakment. The textual presentation of Pastrana, a little lady covered with think black hair singing and dancing in highly feminine attire, challenged the viewers’ understanding of the natural and immutable sex/gender differences that structured their own identities as men and women on the surface. If Pastrana’s exhibition provoked discomfort among the audiences, it also had to assuage the uneasiness that prompted the audience to think about themselves and their place in society. Comparing their own identities to Pastrana the freak, viewers’ identities were reinforced as ordinary people with correct self-identification. They belonged to a strict category
that the society offered, either male or female. Thus, Pastrana was seen as a “pleasing specimen” between a neutral example and a medical sample. Her presentation was carefully mediated, complex but not enough to revise viewers’ expectations of femininity and civilization, but sufficiently to prompt curiosity, exploration and contemplation.

The Regent Gallery handbill also suggested the nature of Pastrana’s presentation in her performance (Stern, 2008). The 1858 drawing of Pastrana in Germany at Warsaw demonstrated her elegant gesture with bow and flower on her head. Pastrana was clothed in a short crinoline dress under a tight corset, and the décolletage was shown generally to emphasize hair as much as flesh. What a fantastic freak she was: a woman with a beard and lots of hair on her chest. The visual rhetorics heightened the anxious fascination with gender confusion in order to draw customers and successfully practice of enfreakment. But two portions of Pastrana’s exhibition were designed to enforce her femininity; the offstage medical check-ups inspected if her facial hair was fake or not, and private checkups to ensure her biological sex as a female. Her facial hair only gained social meaning when she was assigned the female identity. Thus, the rhetorical purpose was to reassure the viewer’s traditional vision of masculinity and femininity. She served as the role model for women in the way that she reinforced everything that was wrong and they should not do or be.

Conclusion

Sex/gender can override other interpretations. The strict understanding of gender distinction in the case of Pastrana’s enfreakment supports the ontological idea of sex as substance. Butler argues that if the category of woman cannot hold, then this is due to the fact that gender binary is crossed by others such as race, ethnicity, class, etc (Copjec, 1994). Rather, Pastrana’s other identities can be read as parts of the enfreakment process for gender fortification.
Although not as explicit as the beard movement, as a popular form of entertainment, freak shows mitigated the tension that the complication of sex/gender binary created. Ideological aporia that Pastrana’s presentation created was carefully intervened in order to assuage the uneasiness that the spectators felt. Seeing facial hair on a feminized presentation of a person who embodies typical womanly traits, the viewers understood their own bodies fitting into the normalcy of the dichotomy. Therefore, the success of Pastrana’s exhibition lays its ground on the long history of the opposite nature of head hair and body hair. The beard encouraged the viewers to ponder of their positions in the society. The significance of Julia Pastrana’s Victorian exhibitions lies in the presentation of facial hair.

Going back to her last words, was she really loved for herself? As an object of exploitation, the other and the extraordinary, her body had the potential to confuse the dichotomy of gender but was not permitted to spoken as so. Instead, Pastrana was carefully packaged into the product of error, probed by medical examiners to be implicitly identified as a woman. Indeed, Pastrana regarded herself as a woman embodying the feature of a man. The process of enfreakment has given her a life of an abused celebrity, perhaps not the one that she wanted since she was put to an extraordinary position to maintain and reify the discourse of a social norm. The identity that she bore was a cultural interpretation that controlled the lives of the contemporaries. At least, she thought she was loved for herself and died happy. Yet, we would never know if the pious who admire the wonders, connoisseurs who observe in awe or spectators looking for genteel pleasure loved the freak who bore no subjectivity.
References


Notes

1 Her dresses were deliberately chosen; an intricate dress of a length that in her time would have been regarded as immodest except in a dancer or circus performer.

2 The process seemed to have involved legal quarrels, as it is known that Lent submitted the marriage certificate to reclaim the bodies.