

Complications of Life

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Last week I had lunch with a doctor friend. We were talking about this and that when very casually he made some remark to the effect that there had been an increase in pseudo-hermaphrodites. Eh? What on earth was a pseudo-hermaphrodite? Was it similar to a pseudo-intellectual, someone who went around with a copy of Proust they had never read? Was the pseudo-hermaphrodite someone who went around with a copy of a penis they never took to bed?

It seemed, however, that being a pseudo-hermaphrodite was a much more complicated business. The doctor said that some people were born with the X and Y chromosomes that ought to make them men. But these people had no male receptors. This meant that the male organs failed to grow and female ones appeared instead – up to a point. A pseudo-hermaphrodite is unable to conceive. Generally, then, they only found out what they were when they tried to become pregnant.

So, they were men but had no real male organs. This might now be true of the male sex as a whole. But the case of the pseudo-hermaphrodite is no laughing matter. In the past ten years, I was told, their numbers have shot up, as it were. At some point we would be looking at a possible *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* scenario. Concerned, I asked how one might recognise these creatures. With envy in my soul, apparently. My friend told me they were often very beautiful, tall, slim, possessing boyish figures, small pert bottoms and breasts. In fact, added my friend, "They look like supermodels. I would say that about a third of supermodels are actually pseudo-hermaphrodites."

Really? You mean that when one looks at a *Vogue* cover girl it might be a coverboy. Very possibly. But no one quite knew why there were more around now than there used to be. It might be something in the water, it might be general biological blurring of the sexes. One couldn't be sure. Then again it may be that many historical figures were pseudo-hermaphrodites without anyone knowing it.

This started me thinking about famous women who might actually have been men. There was Joan of Arc. She had a pert figure and a half, though she ended up looking a bit frazzled. And what of Elizabeth I? Maybe there was a good reason why she never agreed to marry and start a family? Anyway, a pseudo-hermaphrodite struck me as the perfect New Labour person. A man who looks like a woman and has female sensibilities but will never be a burden on the state by becoming a single mother. What an ideal candidate for Parliament. Far less embarrassment potential than the male MP who is suddenly found to be a cross-dresser, or worse.

A while ago a female acquaintance found herself standing next to a nice-looking man in a taxi queue at Waterloo station. He was carrying a shopping bag with pink ribbons. "What's in that?" the woman asked (impertinently, perhaps). The man pulled out reams of silky lingerie. "How pretty. Who is that a present for?" "It's for me," he beamed with pride. "I'm a cross-dresser."

I wonder if they had cross-dressers in 999, one millennium ago. Maybe that is why Ethered was always Unready. It took him too long to get his women's togs on and off. But five or six centuries later cross-dressing would have seemed pointless. All those male frills and furbelows in the 17th and 18th centuries – enough to satisfy the perversions of the most rampant Tory.

There were plenty of real pseudo-hermaphrodites in those days. Consider the notorious Chevalier D'Eon. No one knew whether Chevalier D'Eon was a man or a woman. He looked equally convincing as both. When the Chevalier finally died it transpired that he had forbidden an autopsy. But someone claimed to have bribed a nun who saw his naked corpse as it lay in a holy place. And? Apparently the nun couldn't tell either.