

# THE LADY WHO APPEARS TO BE A GENTLEMAN

By Eileen Myles

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Myles Forum Galley 1  
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9:40 a.m.

The opportunity to write about Stonewall provokes in me mainly a big *ehh* and a shrug. As a they lesbian I get a lot of offers in and around June and this is the big June. There's a lot of "weighing in." I'm heavy with it now. I was mulling all this in London last week while strolling through a Diane Arbus show at the Hayward and there was Stormé DeLarverie and the photo was captioned "The Lady who appears to be a gentleman."

Arbus's titles fascinated me as much as the photos themselves since they seemed to be these nineteenth-century inventories of what the shot holds and when she refers to trans people you get the lingo of the time, e.g., "Female impersonator holding long gloves" and so on. The photo is the photo but the need to proclaim the apparent deception is part and parcel of the expository nature of her work. They are here because the performance of a lady being a gentleman or a man in dress and makeup is just right up there with "a Jewish giant at home with his parents." And, I think that the document, the photo itself, say in the case of Stormé, out-weighs the unseemly description. There's a faint echo of the lady is a tramp, but instead we get something elegant. That's the twist. And it keeps twisting. This lady, legend has it, may've been who or what really triggered the Stonewall Rebellion on June 27, 1969.

EM:  
twentieth?

Apparently a kid Stormé knew was being kicked and pulled into the paddy wagon and so they punched a cop, trying to help him. And look what happened. A revolution, for sure. That keeps twisting. Trans people are increasingly front and center in the ongoing question of how “we” (the LGBT community and to a lesser extent the world in terms of how it “apprehends” us) understand gender and sexuality and Stonewall is framed more and more as an event in which trans people, in particular trans POC (most notably Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera) very much participated and increasingly they are the face of the moment as opposed to the perennial focus on white gay men. And that’s a relief . . . yet there is also this lesbian, this butch lesbian, as they like to call Stormé who might’ve thrown the first punch, and as a they lesbian myself I like seeing him first. “He” was Stormé’s chosen pronoun and he didn’t seem to have a problem with the word lady either. All of which is just the tip of this anarchistic thing. So let me say it. What I want from the grand Stonewall moment if I can have anything is first of all an inclusion of FTMs when we speak about the revolution in gender that is happening in our time. In the occasions of trans people being celebrated in the media and in art the focus is almost entirely on transwomen and I’m wondering if that’s because masculinity (the port that they departed from) is so precious and the unimaginable act of negating it is, if not a crime, an explosive and radical act. But what about attaining it, or simply putting it on? What about my epaulets? It’s interesting that female masculinity or simply masculinity performed is greeted with the most severe ostracization. He’s simply not there. And this coincides with the history of lesbians butch or femme in terms of our collisions or non-collisions with the law. In Russia sodomy was a crime, and then sodomy was legalized, and now it’s a crime again. But for lesbians there and globally it’s treated like mental illness and he’s simply put away and zapped until he agrees to be she again. Or we get raped back. Globally it’s called corrective rape. In our culture it’s still a commonplace to say she needs the right man, or a good stiff dick. Joan of Arc

was actually burned for being in drag, that was her crime. In her first trial she agreed to no longer wear men's clothes and in jail where she was constantly threatened with violence and rape they took away her female clothes and left some men's duds, perhaps a nice rugby shirt, jeans and some socks, a pair of loafers. She put them on to protect herself from sexual assault and the rest is history. I remember the anger directed at me by the man who ran the bowling alley (1965) when I walked into the ladies room with my Sasoon do because I simply produced a male affect when I got the same haircut all the other girls had. There just was this secret self in me not so deep but held down anxiously in order to escape some punishment I knew I would receive for not entirely being female, but a wily boy-man. At a moment in time when the environment is being raped by our criminal president, when Gaza is being bombed with impunity, when POC are routinely detained, shot, in America, for the crime of being themselves, not white, when Native people are only a blip on the history of the country that stole its land from them, and Mexico, we need a wall to keep those fuckers out . . . I would like to claim a piece of this Stonewall moment for standing quietly and sullenly with the queerest piece of all, the experience of feeling male every day and being asked when I order my coffee is that all you'd like Ma'am, or at a table of very mixed gender people how are you ladies doing. Is that it, Miss. Or the stewardess goes how are you doing, Sir and then what would you like, Sweetie turning to me. "I," as I understand myself, am invisible. What would I like? I would like an entire upending of rules, an erasure of what's polite, a celebration of a gendered public self as a given, self-description accepted or not commented on, parceled, incarcerated by your need to categorize being the polite rule, or my absolute preference today, Honey, no gendered greeting at all. I'd like to be him, I'd like to be them, I'd frequently want to be left alone as human, a person drinking their coffee, free and unmarked in the world, celebrating fifty Stonewall years of being part of everything as myself, an inchoate adult citizen, in-

EM:  
"I'd like" or "I  
frequently want"?

EM:  
"Sassoon" with two  
"s"s like the stylist?

tact and holding it all. Not so much  
left alone as left alive. ■