Joanne Meyerowitz

Transforming Sex: Christine Jorgensen in the Postwar U.S.

Christine Jorgensen entered the public eye in December 1952, via the *New York Daily News*. The front-page headline read, "Ex-GI Becomes Blonde Beauty: Operations Transform Bronx Youth," and the story inside told of her medical treatments in Denmark and her "sex-conversion" from man to woman (1). The initial publicity quickly escalated into media madness. Over the next several months, Jorgensen appeared in hundreds of newspaper and magazine articles in the United States and abroad. In February 1953, she returned to New York and learned to live in—and love—the spotlight. Soon she launched a successful nightclub act, which sustained her popularity, and she appeared on television and radio and in theatrical productions. In 1967, she published her autobiography, which sold almost 450,000 copies in its paperback edition, and in 1970, the Hollywood director Irving Rapper produced the movie version of her life. In the early 1970s, she went on the college lecture circuit and relayed her story to a generation of baby boomers who had missed her startling debut.

In the shadow of the atomic bomb, the red scare, the Korean War, and the emerging civil rights movement, Jorgensen's part as the first celebrity transsexual might seem at first glance to be a forgettable blip in the register of the past. But on closer examination Jorgensen's story provides a critical entry point into twentieth-century tensions over science and sexuality.

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George William Jorgensen Jr. was born in 1926 to a Danish-American family living in the Bronx. To all outward appearances, he led an uneventful youth. But in later accounts, Jorgensen remembered loneliness, alienation, and depression. As a child, George longed for girls' toys and dresses, and as an adolescent, he developed crushes on other teenage boys. As he entered adulthood, he struggled with an insistent and irrepressible desire to live life as a woman. Right after the end of World War II, he was called by the draft and served as a clerical worker in the army for more than a year. "I was extremely effeminate," Jorgensen wrote later. "My emotions were either those of a woman or a homosexual. I believed my thoughts and responses were more often womanly than manly" (2).

In the late 1940s, Jorgensen reached a turning point. Browsing in a local library, he found a book titled *The Male Hormone* (1945), which seemed to offer an explanation for his personal problem (3). To Jorgensen, anything seemed possible in the atomic age, and the relatively new science of endocrinology hinted at solutions. Jorgensen did not decide to take testosterone to become more manly, which is exactly what the book he read suggested, and he also refrained from joining the burgeoning postwar gay male subculture, which he noticed while in the army and after. He understood himself not as a man or a gay man but as a woman, and he hoped to change sex. He began to take estrogen, and he consulted with doctors who confirmed that a few surgeons in Europe had already attempted sex transformation surgery. In 1950, Jorgensen left for Denmark with the express idea of finding treatment. In Copenhagen, he found Dr. Christian Hamburger, an

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EX-GI BECOMES BLONDE BEAUTY

Operations Transform Bronx Youth

—Story on Page 3

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A World of a Difference

George W. Jorgenson Jr., son of a Bronx carpenter, served in the Army [▲] for two years and was given honorable discharge in 1946. Now George is no more. After six operations, Jorgenson's sex has been changed and today she is a striking woman [←], working as a photographer in Denmark. Parents were informed of the big change in a letter Christine (that's her new name) sent to them recently. ***—Story on page 3***

Christine Jorgensen made her public debut on the front page of the *New York Daily News*. *(Image reprinted by permission of The Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender, and Reproduction, and the New York Daily News.)*

PEOPLE IN MEDICINE

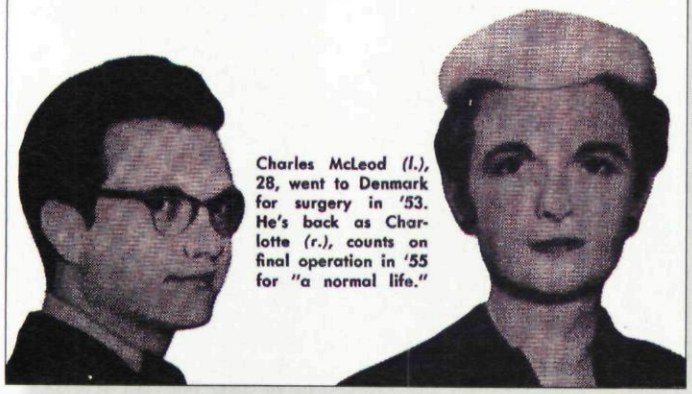
NEW SEX SWITCHES

Behind the Sensational Headlines Loom Unpleasant Medical Facts

Next to the recurrent hydrogen bomb headlines, reports of sex changes are becoming the most persistently startling world news. Latest U.S. case in point is Charles–Charlotte McLeod (*below*). But similar stories crop up elsewhere: In Teheran, surgeons help a 16-year-old girl turn into a soldier of the Shah. In London, a dashing fighter pilot and father readjusts to life as a sophisticated lady. In Naples, 13-year-old Adrianna becomes Andrew.

What are the facts behind these tales? How can a man turn into a woman, and to whom does this happen? PEOPLE TODAY herewith presents the latest authentic information about these secrecy-shrouded phenomena.

News reports generally avoid medical details and precise classification of sex changelings, but each case falls into one of the following groups.



Charles McLeod *(l.)*, 28, went to Denmark for surgery in '53. He's back as Charlotte *(r.)*, counts on final operation in '55 for "a normal life."

In the 1950s, newspapers and magazines carried numerous stories on "sex change." ("New Sex Switches," *People Today*, May 5, 1954. Image reprinted by permission of the Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender, and Reproduction.)

endocrinologist, who agreed to experiment on him free of charge. Under Hamburger's guidance, Jorgensen underwent two years of hormone treatments, psychiatric evaluations, and eventually surgery to remove the male genitalia. Along the way Jorgensen changed her name to Christine and embarked on a new life as a woman.

At the end of 1952, the personal story of George Jorgensen became the public story, the world renowned story, of Christine Jorgensen. Within a few weeks of the initial scoop, Jorgensen had signed on with William Randolph Hearst's *American Weekly*, a Sunday newspaper supplement, for the exclusive story of her life. *American Weekly* orchestrated her return to New York in February to coincide with publication of the story. Reporters met her at the airport and commented obsessively on the details of her clothing, hair, gestures, and voice. The journalists' key concern was whether Jorgensen made a convincing woman. Although one reporter balked when she "tossed off a Bloody Mary like a guy," others noted her "hipswinging" gait, her "slender, trembling fingers," and her "girlish blush" (4). Three days later, with considerable fanfare, *American Weekly* published the first installment in its autobiographical account, "The Story of My Life" (5).

The five-part series might seem to have exhausted the Jorgensen story, but it only egged it on. While the series was running, various journalists started to claim that Jorgensen was a fake. In early April, the *New York Post* published a nationally syndicated six-part series that presented Jorgensen as a man posing as a woman (6). The *Post* revealed that Jorgensen was not, as some early news reports had suggested, intersexed. That is, she was not, in the terms of her day, a "hermaphrodite" (someone with both testicular and ovarian tissue) or a "pseudo-hermaphrodite" (born with sexually ambiguous genitalia but with ovaries internally). Her doctors in Denmark confirmed that before the treatment she was physically a standard male.

Despite the reports, the interest continued unabated. Even the hostile stories enhanced Jorgensen's appeal precisely because they made her a controversial figure. Was she a woman, or wasn't she? Almost all of the press accounts continued to grant Jorgensen her status as a woman, and so, it seems, did the public. Hundreds of letters written to Jorgensen survive in the archives of the Royal Danish Library in Copenhagen. Over and over, letter writers offered support, commended her courage, and sympathized with her struggle to be the person she wanted to be. Meanwhile a steady stream of sensational stories on other transsexuals established that Jorgensen was not alone. The mainstream press reported on Charlotte McLeod and Tamara Rees, both also former GIs, who had sex-change surgery in Denmark and Holland, following in Jorgensen's footsteps. And *Jet*, an African American magazine, announced that Charles Robert Brown, who hoped to have surgery in Germany, could "become the first Negro 'transvestite' in history to transform his sex." Although the press showed considerably less interest, it also occasionally reported, usually briefly, on women transformed into men. In 1954, the magazine *People Today* stated: "Next to the recurrent hydrogen bomb headlines, reports of sex changes are becoming the most persistently startling world news" (7).

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The story of Christine Jorgensen serves as an episode in the history of sensational journalism, mass culture, and celebrity. It attracted readers, in part, because it offered an unconventional twist on a tried-and-true American tale of adversity, human striving, and success. With dignity and poise, Jorgensen told a moving story of someone who had pursued her own dreams and overcome seemingly insurmountable obstacles. But the Jorgensen story also captured public attention because it highlighted a number of key tensions of the mid-twentieth century. It pointed, for example, to the promise of science in the atomic age. It suggested that science could conquer nature and, in so doing, reinforced an optimistic vision of a future in which doctors, as saviors, offered miraculous cures. But, like the atomic bomb, it also hinted at a frightening Frankensteinian vision, in which overly confident scientists tampered with nature and unleashed destructive forces. The tension between the potential for progress and the possibility of disaster resonated with popular hopes and fears about the postwar surge in science and technology (8).

The Jorgensen story also reflected concerns about gender. After World War II, some commentators worried about a "crisis in masculinity" (9). During the war, women had taken on traditionally male occupations, especially on the home front, and military psychiatrists had publicly expressed concern about the deficient masculinity they claimed to have found in surprising numbers of male recruits. After the war, a number of authors castigated domineering "moms" and "matriarchs," who allegedly reared ineffectual or delinquent sons, and called for the reinforcement of traditional gender distinctions (10). In this context, the stories on Jorgensen, with their endless comments on her appearance, stood as a public restatement of what counted as feminine and what counted as masculine. But her story, in which "an

ex-GI," the quintessential representation of postwar masculinity, became a "blonde beauty," ultimately undermined the attempt to restabilize gender. It could provoke anxieties about the failure of boundaries dividing female and male, and it could also invite fantasies about the possibility of traveling across the suddenly permeable border that separated women from men.

Inevitably, Jorgensen's story also brought issues of sexuality into the news. It had a titillating edge, with a lurking subtext of homosexuality. Jorgensen had, after all, confessed her pre-operative (and post-operative) attraction to men. In the years after World War II, increasingly visible gay subcultures elicited increasingly homophobic reactions. In the postwar "lavender scare," hundreds of gay men and lesbians were dismissed from their jobs in the federal government. In various cities, police investigated "vice" and arrested gay men in bars, parks, and other public spaces (11). Although she differed from gay men in her sustained desire to live as a woman, Jorgensen nonetheless reminded readers that people born with male bodies did not necessarily have sexual desires for women. Jorgensen underscored the stigma associated with homosexuality when she repeatedly claimed that she had not wanted to live as a gay man. But she also undermined the pathologization of homosexual love when she stated in *American Weekly* that her youthful love for a man was "fine and deep and would have been restful had I been in a position to give and accept in the eyes of society" (12). She pushed her readers to consider whether (and why) the very same person was somehow more acceptable as a heterosexual woman than she had been when living as a feminine man attracted to other men.

The entrepreneurial Jorgensen made and sold a record album interview. (Image reprinted by permission of the Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender, and Reproduction.)

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With its combination of sensation, success, and celebrity and its commentary on science, gender, and sexuality, the Jorgensen story set off its own chain reaction. It rippled its way through popular culture into the medical literature. In the wake of the media blitz, doctors and scientists began to debate the definition of biological sex. Jorgensen and her doctors explicitly argued against the idea of two separate and opposite sexes. They argued instead that all humans have both male and female components. They promoted the notion, prevalent in Europe, of a continuum or spectrum of sex as opposed to polarized sex difference. Jorgensen herself publicized this new conception of biological sex repeatedly in the interviews she gave. In response to the question "Are you a woman?," she answered: "You seem to assume that every person is either a man or a woman. . . . Each person is actually both in varying degrees. . . . I'm more of a woman than I am a man" (13).

The notion of universally mixed bodily sex reached its American heyday with the Jorgensen story, but psychoanalysts and others immediately rejected it. Doctors and scientists gradually turned away from the biological determinism in which the particular mix of male and female determined the particular mix of masculine and feminine. They broke sex into constituent parts—gonads, hormones, chromosomes, genitals—some of which they could alter and some of which they could not. Increasingly they explained the desire to change sex with new concepts of "psychological sex," that is, one's sense of self as male or female. By the mid-1950s they had developed a new language. In 1955, they began to replace "psychological sex" with the term "gender" and a few years later "gender identity." Although the doctors disagreed (then and now) over what exactly determined it, they agreed that gender identity (the sex one felt oneself to be) was not necessarily determined by the gonads, genitals, or chromosomes generally used to define biological sex.

As the doctors honed their new definitions of sex and gender, they also reclassified sexuality. At the time of Jorgensen's surgery, American doctors had barely contributed to the medical literature, mostly in German, on transsexuality. After the publicity concerning Jorgensen, American doctors began to distinguish transsexuality from transvestism and homosexuality. In their new schema, transsexuals had crossgender identification, transvestites crossdressed, and homosexuals felt sexual attractions for members of their own sex. Some doctors (and some transsexuals) attempted to desexualize transsexuality by separating it from transvestic fetish and homosexual desire. In this way, they refined the categories of sexual science in the postwar era.

Eventually the debates that took place in the popular press and in the medical literature made their way into the law. Transsexuals came to the courts to change the sex on their birth certificates, change their names, or ascertain the validity of a marriage. The doctors testified both for and against them, bringing new and competing definitions of sex and gender into the legal record. In the courts, the judges ultimately decided who counted as a woman or a man. In 1966, in the first such prominent case, a judge in New York said he would not change the sex on a birth certificate. He defined sex by the chromosomes, which could not be changed (14). But within a few years, a few judges, who saw themselves as liberals, came up with a new definition of legal sex, which reflected the new conception of gender.

In 1968, Judge Francis Pecora, of the Civil Court of the City of New York, accepted the application of a male-to-female transsexual, who asked to change her legal name from the "obviously 'male'" Robert to the "obviously 'female'" Risa. Pecora distanced himself from

what he considered radical views of universally mixed sex, and he also distinguished himself from conservatives who would prefer to maintain the status quo. Instead, he came up with a new definition of sex. "A male transsexual who submits to a sex-reassignment," he wrote, "is anatomically and psychologically a female in fact" (15). The judge rejected the immutable chromosomes as defining facts of legal sex and relied instead on genitals, which could be altered, and on gender identity. Sex could legally change. The case opened a longer debate, in which the courts, too, began to grapple with, question, and redefine sex.

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From the late 1960s on, transsexuals themselves began to organize for their civil rights. Drawing on the existing movements for racial justice, feminism, and gay liberation, they called for an end to police brutality, employment discrimination, and medical maltreatment. They looked to a future when varied expressions of gender no longer elicited harassment, ridicule, or assault. In the 1970s and 1980s, Christine Jorgensen joined them. She expressed her opposition to sexism and anti-gay initiatives, but mostly she spoke out in favor of transsexual rights. Her story, then, takes us from the reconsiderations of sex, gender, and sexuality of the postwar era to the movements for rights and liberation of the 1960s and after.

Jorgensen saw herself as an early participant in the "sexual revolution." (Harry Benjamin Collection, The Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender and Reproduction. Image reprinted by permission of The Kinsey Institute.)

Historians of sexuality have noted the contradictory trends of the postwar years. Some historians emphasize the constraints on or the "containment" of sexuality in the 1950s, but we could just as easily stress the liberalization that served as a precursor to the more "sexualized society" of the 1960s (16). In the postwar era, for example, we find the best-selling Kinsey reports, published in 1948 and 1953, which described, and pointedly failed to condemn, wide variations in sexual behavior (17). Along with the arrests and firings of gay men, lesbians, and cross-dressers, we also see in the 1950s the first emergence of the American "homophile," or early gay rights, movement (18). A woman of her times, Christine Jorgensen embodied the tension between the simultaneous public restriction and public expression of sexuality. With her ladylike demeanor, she reinforced conventional notions of feminine, heterosexual respectability, but as an "out" transsexual, she also broke all the rules. By her own account, she stood as an ally of Kinsey and a vanguard of the "sexual revolution." ❑

This essay draws on material in my book How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States *(Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).*

Endnotes

1. "Ex-GI Becomes Blonde Beauty," *New York Daily News*, December 1, 1952, 1, 3.
2. Christine Jorgensen, *Christine Jorgensen: A Personal Autobiography* (New York: Paul S. Eriksson, 1967), 43.
3. Paul de Kruif, *The Male Hormone*, reprint (Garden City, NY: Garden City Publishing, 1947, 1945).
4. Josephine Di Lorenzo and Joseph Martin, "Christine Flies In," *New York Daily News*, February 13, 1953, 3; "Sleek Christine Exudes Charm in U.S.," *Stars and Stripes*, February 13, 1953; "Christine Home Again," *San Francisco Examiner*, February 13, 1953; "Glad as Any U.S. Woman to Be Back," *Los Angeles Examiner*, February 13, 1953. The latter three articles are in the Christine Jorgensen Scrapbook, Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender, and Reproduction (hereafter KI), Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.
5. Christine Jorgensen, "The Story of My Life," *American Weekly*, February 15, 1953: 4-5, 7-9.
6. Alvin Davis, "The Truth about 'Christine' Jorgensen," *New York Post*, April 6, 1953, 3.
7. "Male Shake Dancer Plans to Change Sex, Wed GI in Europe," *Jet*, June 18, 1953: 24-25; "New Sex Switches," *People Today*, May 5, 1954: 15, in Transexualism Vertical File, KI.
8. On postwar hopes and fears, see Paul Boyer, *By the Bomb's Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age*, reprint with new preface (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994, 1985).
9. See James Gilbert, *Men in the Middle: Searching for Masculinity in the 1950s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), especially chapters 2 and 4.
10. See Ruth Feldstein, *Motherhood in Black and White: Race and Sex in American Liberalism, 1930-1965* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000).
11. See John D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983); David K. Johnson, *The Lavender Scare: The Cold War Persecution of Gays and Lesbians in the Federal Government* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).
12. Jorgensen, "The Story of My Life," 5.
13. Christine Jorgensen Reveals, interview by R. Russell, J. Records, 1957, available at KI.
14. *Anonymous v. Weiner*, 270 N.Y.S. 2d 319 (1966).
15. In re *Anonymous*, 293 N.Y.S. 2d834, 838 (1968).
16. On "containment" of sexuality, see especially Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1988); on the "sexualized society," see John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988).
17. On the Kinsey reports, see James H. Jones, *Alfred C. Kinsey: A Public/Private Life* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997); Miriam G. Reumann, *American Sexual Character: Sex, Gender, and National Identity in the Kinsey Reports* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).
18. See D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities*; Martin Meeker, "Behind the Mask of Respectability: Reconsidering the Mattachine Society and Male Homophile Practice, 1950s and 1960s," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 10 (January 2001): 78-116. For another form of gay male "oppositional consciousness" in the 1950s, see Robert J. Corber, *Homosexuality in Cold War America: Resistance and the Crisis of Masculinity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997).

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