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WHAT IS A WOMAN?

A history of paranoid reading

KATIE KADUE

TRANSVESTIGATION

17 HOURS AGO

“**W**hat is a woman?” the conservative commentator Matt Walsh inquires, muses, demands, and shouts in his recent **documentary** of that name. Walsh, like many others who loudly ask this question, thinks he already knows the answer. As his wife confirms at the end of the film in the family kitchen, a woman is “an adult human female, who” — here she hands him an apparently woman-proof jar — “needs help opening this.” Walsh goes to such great lengths to feign not knowing what a woman is in order to expose those who, in his view, really don’t: people who use the word “woman” to refer to trans women. For Walsh and other patrollers of the gender boundary, trans women are a contamination risk. They stand accused of infiltrating not only physical women’s spaces like bathrooms and locker rooms but also the clean conceptual space of the category “woman”: they are, according to this transphobic logic, men who fraudulently claim to be women. The suspicion of trans women as threats to the integrity of “true” womanhood has precipitated violence against them while exacerbating the paranoid surveillance of all women, from the harassment of short-haired cis women in public restrooms to the obsessive deconstruction of online photographs to yield “proof” that actresses’ jawlines and collarbone placements make them incontrovertibly male.

The impulse to police the border of “true” from “false” women has given rise to various special units of female body investigators. There are the **“transvestigators”** of or adjacent to QAnon, who believe that celebrities’ elaborate “Elite Gender Inversion” procedures can be reverse engineered through the use of forensic diagrams. There are the mockinvestigators like Walsh, who in his film pretends to puzzle over a conspiracy board of clues that will finally lead to the truth of womanhood. (“Can my boys really become girls?” Walsh asks in a deadpan voiceover. “Do I have four daughters? Do I now have to pay for four weddings?”) Ted Cruz, in a recent campaign appearance, **wondered aloud** if Elizabeth Warren had a penis. And then there are the self-identified TERFs who **analyze graphic designs of silhouettes for signs of cropped-out Adam’s apples**. But all these Facebook groups, subreddits, and bad jokes are based on the same assumption: *any woman might be hiding a dirty secret* even those women like **I K Rowling** who have

woman might be hiding a dirty secret, even those women, like **S. K. ROWLING**, who have taken it upon themselves to remove trans women, and the deception they supposedly represent, from “women” as a class. Interpretive apparatuses must never be at rest. The entire female-presenting population must be incessantly monitored — including the monitors themselves — lest a single false woman get past the sensors and fatally compromise gender security.

At the same time, the parodically paranoid readers of women’s faces and bodies who build up elaborate hermeneutic networks to expose the male truth underneath female appearances often also insist on the self-evidence of that truth. Walsh’s documentary casts this contradiction as a folksy paradox, where the definition of woman is a “simple question” even while women are such a “complete mystery” that even black-hole expert Stephen Hawking couldn’t figure them out. Online, the idea that “we can always tell” when a woman is trans is such a cliché of gender-critical feminism as to have become a social media punchline: a Twitter search of the phrase will lead to reams of tweets insisting that a particular cis woman in a photograph — **Katie Ledecy**, **Sigourney Weaver**, **Cher** — is obviously, as anyone with two eyes can see, a man. (When this error is brought to the gender detective’s attention, they will sometimes respond that they can always tell in real life, but photographs — because they’re doctored, because they’re two-dimensional, or perhaps because they are evil illusions meant to tempt us away from God’s truth — can deceive.) But whether the claim is that it’s difficult to see through trans women’s disguises or that it’s easy, the upshot is the same: trans women only want one thing, and it’s to trick us into believing they’re women.

This transmisogyny, relatively new as it may seem, shares a premise with the regular old misogyny that’s been mainstream for centuries: some women — though it’s not always easy to tell which ones — are defined by their fundamental and dangerous falseness. Anyone wondering what a woman was in seventeenth-century England could just ask the preacher and poet Robert Herrick. “Learn of me what woman is,” Herrick facetiously offers in **“Upon Some Women,”** a short, punchy poem addressed to sexually frustrated men in need of some real talk. A woman draped in diaphanous silks may *seem* beautiful, the poem cautions, but don’t be fooled by that flimsy veil. What she *really* is is *garbage*.

“pieces, patches, ropes of hair; / Inlaid garbage everywhere,” and despite that sentient trash heap’s best efforts to “cheat us,” Herrick can see right through her gauzy disguise. The results of the poet’s full-body examination are in, and the truth about woman is that she’s false: “False in legs, and false in thighs; / False in breast, teeth, hair, and eyes, / False in head and false enough.”

Like their modern-day counterparts, these older efforts at unveiling women only reveal that the attempt to hygienically separate “true” women from “false” pretenders always fails: all women end up under suspicion. The title of Herrick’s poem announces its topic as “some women” but its opening lines tell us “what woman is,” implicating the entire category of “woman.” Joseph Swetnam, a man best remembered for inspiring the **coinage of the English word “misogynist,”** similarly opens his 1615 *Arraignment of Lewd, Idle, Froward, and Unconstant Women* by laying out charges “against some women.” But he, too, quickly slips into a condemnation of women in general. A woman, Swetnam explains, is like “a painted ship, which seemeth fair outwardly,” but is full of worthless ballast. She’s also like a gold-plated figurine that’s solid lead inside, like a shining glowworm that turns black when you pick it up, like a poisonous snake hiding in the lush grass, like an ugly toad under the surface of a clear pond. In sum, “a woman which is fair in show is foul in condition.” As the title of Swetnam’s pamphlet suggests, the project of answering the question “what is a woman?” seems to require a virtual courtroom, with a steady parade of evidence exhibits and witnesses drawn from classical myth and biblical history (“Solomon saith that women are like unto wine, for that they will make men drunk with their devices”). Women are criminals, their foremost crime is fraud, and they need to be arraigned, prosecuted, and brought to justice.

In Herrick and Swetnam’s time, the hidden corruption that had to be rooted out from beneath made-up faces, delicate veils, fragrant perfumes, and feminine charms was usually adultery, bad skin, or syphilis. In contemporary transphobic discourse, what lurks under surgeries, Photoshop, and pronouns is maleness. Tranvestigators’ compulsive repetition of incurious investigation, going through the motions of interpretation only to find the same expected result, could define much of our current political and cultural

discourse. But for some, women's bodies seem to make this caricature of a critical habit go into libidinal overdrive. Everyone's a gender critic now. If these critical operations are frequently botched, that's only a further sign of how little signs can be trusted, of how much we must need to amp up our efforts. And in this respect, if you believe the chorus of male voices from Early Church Fathers to Renaissance poets and pamphleteers, trans women are just like all other women. As every cuckoldry-obsessed character in Shakespeare knows, you can't trust a woman to be true just because she looks like it. "She's but the sign and semblance of her honor," Claudio sneers of his jilted fiancée Hero in *Much Ado About Nothing*. "Would you not swear, / All you that see her, that she were a maid, / By these exterior shows?" he asks the spectators he's gathered to witness Hero's humiliation when he, under the mistaken impression she's cheated on him, leaves her at the altar. "But," he bitterly concludes, like a trial lawyer tying up his case, "she is none."

In fact, innocent appearances might be the most damning evidence of guilt, as Othello seems to believe when he explains Desdemona's apparent (and actual) guilelessness by pronouncing her "a subtle whore, / A closet lock and key of villainous secrets." Sometimes the end result of these false accusations of falseness is romantic comedy (Hero turns out to be, to Claudio's relief, the adult human female of his dreams). But often it's tragic. The fact that the monomaniacal obsession with unveiling women's falseness is itself so often based on false pretenses would be boring were it not potentially fatal: for many suspicious husbands, lovers, and readers in literature and life, the only way to make sure a woman isn't false is to make sure she's not anything at all.

Katie Kadue is a writer living in Los Angeles.