

V

No Seahorse Is a Mare

A reading of Elizabeth Duval's After Trans *(V): "An Aside on the Subject of Feminism"*

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1. Much ado

This is the fifth instalment of a chapter-by-chapter reading of *Después de lo trans* (*After Trans*, 2021), the book in which the Spanish writer Elizabeth Duval argues about the foundations of the trans category instead of fortifying them. Her sixth chapter wades into what she calls "the greatest schism in Spanish feminism":[1] the quarrel that broke out in 2020 between feminists who reject gender self-identification and trans activism, with Lidia Falcón asking whether "it is left-wing to give hormones to a child so that he changes sex", Paula Fraga calling queer theory "the institutionalisation of misogyny", and the Socialist Party circulating a briefing paper against it.[2]

Some things must be conceded, and are conceded gladly. Duval defends "a fascist's right to call me a fucking tranny"[3] on social media, and Lidia Falcón's right to say what she thinks without fines or prosecutions, since censoring them would turn them into martyrs. It is a brave liberal position in a field that usually clamours for punishment. Her political analysis also contains a good deal of truth: the Socialist Party treats feminism as family property, its coalition partner Unidas Podemos had taken the Ministry of Equality from it, and the struggle for hegemony between one left and another accounts for much of the volume of the debate. "This, more than anything else, is about politics."[4]

The trouble lies in what Duval then does with that diagnosis. In the first half of the chapter she takes on the philosophers of Spanish equality feminism (Amelia Valcárcel, Luisa Posada Kubissa, Ana de Miguel) and concludes that their objections contain very little: "so much noise [...] for so few nuts in the end".[5] In the second half she explains the conflict by party warfare. The move from one to the other is a genetic fallacy. That it suited the Socialist deputy prime minister to stir the issue against her Podemos rival explains why the debate reached the headlines; it says nothing about who is right. The history of why someone holds a thesis does not make it false. And there are nuts, plenty of them, in a place Duval declined to look.

2. Strategy and class

Duval believes she has found her opponents' great concession. Posada Kubissa grants that "nobody, women included, is born with a given identity that determines their needs", and proposes a feminist politics organised around a "strategic identity: women".[6] Duval is delighted: if the identity is strategic, it can be debated, and the feminism that excludes trans women would then stand convicted of having made a strategy sacred.

But a strategic identity and membership of a class are two different things, and Posada is speaking of the first. A movement's political identity may well be a strategy, open to debate and revision, while the class to which that strategy refers remains defined by something that is not strategic at all. The labour movement may argue over how to frame its political identity; nobody concludes that the working class is a fiction one joins by declaration. Duval confuses identity with class, just as in her opening chapters she confused identification and perception with belonging.

And when Valcárcel defines feminism as the struggle against "the oldest and most onerous inequality of all, the one justified by sex", against the power of "the generic collective of men over the generic collective of women",[7] she is not muddling her terms, as Duval suggests. She uses "gender" for

the social treatment bodies receive according to their sex, which is the correct usage. What is missing, then, is what Duval never supplies: a definition of woman that depends neither on identification, nor on the gaze, nor on a strategy. Here is one.

3. What the seahorse knows

Biologically, sex is not a free-standing attribute but a position within a relation: sexual reproduction. And within that relation the two positions are defined by the type of gamete. One produces small, mobile gametes; the other, large, immobile ones. This is called anisogamy, and it is what defines males and females throughout nature, from algae to mammals.[8]

The seahorse teaches the point better than any textbook. In that species it is the male who carries the fertilised eggs in a pouch, broods them and gives birth. He does everything common sense associates with motherhood, and he remains male, because he produces small gametes. Gestation does not make him female.[9] His lesson is simple and devastating for a good deal of gender theory: sex depends neither on what one does, nor on what one feels, nor on one's part in rearing the young. It depends on the gamete towards which one's body is organised. No seahorse is a mare, however pregnant he may be.

That is the ground floor of the definition. The first floor explains why, in our species, that difference became destiny.

4. Who gets to leave

In 1972 the biologist Robert Trivers set out the theory of parental investment: everything a parent puts into one offspring to improve its chances of survival, at the expense of what it might put into others in future.[10] What matters, Trivers showed, is not sex in the abstract but who invests more. The sex that invests more becomes the scarce resource; the sex that invests less competes for access to it. Richard Dawkins popularised the idea in *The Selfish Gene* with a blunt image: somebody has to be left holding the baby, and the temptation to leave falls to whoever has least to lose.[11] The theory does not say males desert; it says that whoever is less bound deserts. Which is why, in species where the male broods, the balance shifts.

In our species the balance admits no ambiguity. Fertilisation is internal, gestation takes place in a single body, it lasts nine months, childbirth puts life at risk, and throughout history it was followed by years of breastfeeding. Fathers invest too, and a great deal; at best, raising children is a task for two. But the father's investment is optional and the mother's obligatory. The least a man contributes towards a child is one cell and a couple of minutes; twenty at the very least, if he fancies himself a fine specimen of the male of the species. The least a woman contributes is her body for nine months. One pole can inseminate and leave; the other remains bound. I call this the asymmetry of exit. Even when a woman decides to end a pregnancy, that exit runs through her body: it is a procedure performed on her, not on him.

Human history is the history of how societies managed that asymmetry. The cult of virginity, adultery punished on one side only, the barren wife sent back to her family, and the old Spanish proverb that sums it all up: "My daughters' children are my grandchildren; my sons' children may or may not be."[12] Patriarchy may be described as the system that tied down the pole with no exit and left the

door open for the other. Duval knows this, and wrote it in her second chapter: "the origin of patriarchy can hardly be explained unless we attend to its connection with a primary division between the sexes", and specifically to "the capacity to gestate".[13] What she will not accept is the consequence: if the system arose from that relation, the class it oppresses is the one that occupies that position within it.

5. Wombs on legs

Here comes the usual objection: women are not wombs on legs. Quite so. A woman is a great deal more than her capacity to bear children, just as a worker is a great deal more than his wage. But remove the wage from the theory and exploitation can no longer be explained. Remove the gestating body from the definition of woman, and the oppression feminism was born to fight can no longer be explained either. The definition does not say what a woman is worth; it says what position she occupies in a relation.

This also answers Duval's central objection. In her view, the feminism that defends sex falls into an "identitarianism of sex" which "constructs a single experience of being a woman, tied to bodily experiences such as menstruation or motherhood",[14] and so excludes women who do not live that experience. But the definition proposed here depends on no experience whatever. A woman who has never been a mother, a barren woman, a woman who no longer menstruates, do not share the experience of motherhood, and they occupy the same position in the relation all the same, because their bodies are organised towards the same pole. Infertility, in them, is a privation in the Aristotelian sense: they lack something that belongs to their kind, as the blind man lacks sight.[15] The rare variations of sexual development change none of this: they are exceptions within a two-pole system, and a biological class is not dissolved by the existence of borderline cases, any more than day dissolves into dusk.

6. The other pole

The consequence follows of its own accord. A trans woman, in the overwhelming majority of cases, has a body organised towards the pole that has the exit. That it never so much as crosses her mind to use it is another matter, and not in dispute. What is in dispute is the organisation of her body, and here the argument has two halves. The negative half: she lacks the female organisation, and that lack is not a privation but an absence, like sight in a stone; she never belonged to that kind. The positive half, which is stronger: she has the organisation of the other pole. She does not stand outside the relation, as something neutral would; she stands on the opposite side of the very relation that defines the category. To include her in the category of woman is not to widen its borders but to admit, by nominal decree, the pole with the exit into a category whose entire history is that of the pole that could not leave.

The predictable objection is that hormones sterilise. Duval herself tells us in her prologue that treatment left her sterile.[16] But the answer is the one that holds for the barren woman, and symmetry requires that it hold here too: what counts is the organisation of the body, not its present function. If the barren woman does not cease to belong to the gestating pole, the sterilised trans woman does not

cease to belong to the other. Any other answer would be a double standard. Nor is it an accident that when Duval, in another chapter, looks for what she shares with other trans women, the first thing she names is precisely "our inability to gestate":[17] the trait they share is that of the pole they come from.

The most elegant proof, however, is supplied by trans men. Their bodies are organised towards gestation, and some of them do gestate. But the testosterone they take to masculinise is contraindicated in pregnancy, because it masculinises the foetus.[18] The trans man who wishes to perform the function his body is organised for must suspend, for months, the very thing that makes him look like a man. To gestate, he must stop producing the artifice and let nature get on with it. The seahorse gestates and remains male; the trans man who gestates confirms that he never left the pole that gestates.

7. What a woman's body ought to be

The most remarkable thing is that Duval, in this very chapter, writes three sentences that only make sense if this definition is correct.

The first comes in her analysis of violence against trans women. Punishment, she says, is imposed by way of correction when "the Other's first perception does not match the later perception of what a woman's body ought to be".[19] What a woman's body ought to be. To explain that violence, Duval needs a norm of the female body, the very norm her theory declares a convention.

The second comes in her critique of the trans bill: "the law should not reflect identities or recognise every single feeling of individuals, but social workings and orders".[20] There is no social order older or more persistent than reproduction. By Duval's own criterion, that is what the law should reflect, rather than the identity someone declares.

The third comes in the same critique. If being trans requires no change of appearance, she writes, it becomes "a merely enunciative reality, which comes into being only through a speech act", and what that speech act produces is a "correction", because the sexual schema the observer has already formed "occupies a place prior to the word".[21] What occupies a place prior to the word is the body. Duval wrote all three sentences and walked straight past them, like someone throwing the nuts away with the shells.

8. Stone lions

A question of vocabulary remains, and I shall treat it with all the malice it deserves. I say "trans woman", and I will never say "cis woman". The reason lies in adjectives. Some adjectives specify: "Uruguayan woman" or "pregnant woman" name a woman and add a feature without removing her from the category. Others displace. A former senator is no longer a senator, a president-elect is not yet president, a stone lion is not a lion. The medieval logicians called these *alienating* adjectives: they do not specify the noun, they strip it of the extension it had.[22] There is nothing insulting about being a former senator, who may be an admirable man, or a stone lion, which may be a work of art. They are simply not what the noun names.

If "woman" designates the class of bodies organised to gestate, then "trans" in "trans woman" works in just this way: it names not a kind of woman but someone who has transitioned towards the social form of a woman. That is why I find the expression acceptable, even honest: it names a real journey without asserting a membership the body will not sustain. "Cis" does the opposite. It was coined

so that "woman" would become a genus with two species, like blondes and brunettes, or the slim and the stout. The pair comes from Latin, "on this side" and "on the other side", the same pair chemistry uses for isomers: molecules with the same formula and a different arrangement in space.[23] The image fits exactly what the term presupposes, the same substance in a different configuration, and to accept the word is to concede that thesis without ever having argued it. If the "trans" in "trans woman" is alienating, then "cis woman" is a pleonasm, like saying "a lion of flesh and blood". Nobody needs to specify that a lion is made of flesh and blood until someone starts counting the stone ones as lions.

Duval closed her chapter convinced that her opponents had precious few nuts left. The nuts were in anisogamy, in Trivers, in the proverb about grandchildren, in the testosterone that must be stopped in order to gestate, and in three sentences of her own text. What Duval lacked was a nutcracker. And the seahorse, who carries, gives birth and remains male, could have lent her one.

Notes

1. Elizabeth Duval, *Después de lo trans: sexo y género entre la izquierda y lo identitario*, La Caja Books, 2021 (ebook, ISBN 978-84-17496-50-0), ch. 6, "Inciso sobre el sujeto del feminismo". The ebook has no fixed pagination, so references are to chapter and section, and the author's marginal notes are cited by their letter. All translations from Duval are my own.
2. Duval, ch. 6, introduction, on the Socialist Party (PSOE) briefing paper signed by Carmen Calvo and José Luis Ábalos in 2020.
3. Duval, ch. 6, introduction.
4. Duval, ch. 6, "Escenas de guerra partidista".
5. Duval, ch. 6, "Problematizar el feminismo filosófico".
6. Luisa Posada Kubissa, *¿Quién hay en el espejo? Lo femenino en la filosofía contemporánea*, Madrid, Cátedra, 2019; quoted in Duval, ch. 6, "Problematizar el feminismo filosófico".
7. Amelia Valcárcel, quoted by Posada Kubissa and, through her, in Duval, ch. 6, "Problematizar el feminismo filosófico".
8. Geoff A. Parker, R. Robin Baker and V. G. F. Smith, "The origin and evolution of gamete dimorphism and the male-female phenomenon", *Journal of Theoretical Biology*, 36 (3), 1972, pp. 529–553.
9. Kai N. Stölting and Anthony B. Wilson, "Male pregnancy in seahorses and pipefish: beyond the mammalian model", *BioEssays*, 29 (9), 2007, pp. 884–896.
10. Robert L. Trivers, "Parental investment and sexual selection", in Bernard Campbell (ed.), *Sexual Selection and the Descent of Man, 1871–1971*, Chicago, Aldine, 1972, pp. 136–179.
11. Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (1976), ch. 9, "Battle of the sexes".
12. Traditional Spanish proverb: "Los hijos de mis hijas, mis nietos son; los de mis hijos, serán o no".
13. Duval, ch. 2, "El género como sistema y el género como proceso".
14. Duval, ch. 6, "Problematizar el feminismo filosófico".
15. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, V, 22, 1022b22–1023a7, on privation (*sterēsis*).
16. Duval, "Prolegómenos".
17. Duval, ch. 4, fragment 6.
18. Alexis D. Light et al., "Transgender men who experienced pregnancy after female-to-male gender transitioning", *Obstetrics & Gynecology*, 124 (6), 2014, pp. 1120–1127.
19. Duval, ch. 6, "Problematizar el feminismo filosófico".
20. Duval, ch. 6, "Escenas de guerra partidista".
21. Ibid.
22. Peter T. Geach, "Good and Evil", *Analysis*, 17 (2), 1956, pp. 33–42, on attributive adjectives; the notion of the *adiectivum alienans* comes from medieval logic.
23. In organic chemistry, *cis/trans* designates geometric isomerism; the term "cisgender" gained currency in the 1990s.