

Politics in Scholarly Drag: Dreger's Assault on the Critics of Bailey

Deirdre McCloskey

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Dreger defends Bailey at length and assaults those like me who disagreed with his book and his behavior.

Why is the Clarke Institute theory of gender crossing so bad? For one thing, it has trivial scientific support. Dreger claims throughout her long essay that, on the contrary, it has a lot. But look at her citations, which again and again are to the same handful of papers. For another, most students of the matter don't believe the Clarke Institute. Look at the immense literature, which neither Bailey nor Dreger have much studied, saying that gender crossing is a matter of free choice of identity, not sex, sex, sex. And the worst feature of the theory is the treatment it inspires at the Institute and elsewhere. As Bailey (2003) himself notes, "some psychiatrists refuse to recommend for sex reassignment any man who has had even one incident of erotic crossdressing" (p. 174). That is the problem. That, and the murders and lesser mistreatments which can be laid at the door of those who have wanted so very much and for so very long to define a free human choice as a sexual pathology.

Dreger is correct that Bailey doesn't really get going in his distaste for late-transitioning gender crossers until late in the book, where he describes them as liars (p. 146) who are best classified with "masochism, sadism, exhibitionism,...necrophilia, bestiality, and pedophilia" (p. 171), needing "curing" (p. 207). Admittedly, Bailey's view of early transitioning gender crossers is little better, since they apparently are inclined to "shoplifting or prostitution or both" (p. 185) and to taking jobs as strippers (p. 142). How he would know any of this scientifically, considering that most MtF gender crossers

early or late disappear without comment into the female population, is never made clear.

Indeed, Bailey and his little group of followers claim that nothing can be learned about gender crossing from actually talking to the tens of thousands of people worldwide who have been through it. You see, unless gender crossers agree with the Clarke Institute theory based on a few sexual-stimulation studies (which never have female controls, by the way), they are liars or self-deluded. So much for the bulk of the evidence available to serious students of the matter. It's like doing astronomy without looking at the sky. That's why Bailey feels no responsibility as a scientist to read anything or listen to anyone beyond a sample of convenience sized 7 gathered in the gay bars of Chicago. He claims for example to have read my own book, *Crossing: A Memoir* (McCloskey, 1999). But you can tell immediately from his brief description of it in his own book that he's fibbing. He writes that McCloskey "focuses on the standard transsexual story ('I was always a female')." No I don't. He said in an interview with the *Chicago Reader* in 2003: "Deirdre says he [get it? 'he'] was really a woman inside. What does that mean really? What does it mean to say you were a man but you 'felt like a woman'?" But I said nothing of the kind. To be sure, the ten-second journalistic take on gender crossers is that they are "women trapped in a man's body." But that's not how I felt, nor is it how anything like all gender crossers have felt. When I was a man, I felt like one.

Why do Bailey and Dreger have such difficulty understanding human choice and change? I suppose it's because they are enamored of a behaviorist meta-theory that says that people just are this or that, from birth, despite all the anthropological and psychological and literary evidence to the contrary. Born a man, always a man, even if a queer man who gets off on gender change. "Bailey and Blanchard aren't interested in whether people's *narratives* fit Blanchard's theory," Dreger writes

D. McCloskey (✉)
Department of Economics, University of Illinois at Chicago, UH
2100, Harrison and Morgan, Chicago, IL 60605, USA
e-mail: deirdre2@uic.edu

triumphantly, “They are interested in whether *people* do.” Under this theory, people just are, presumably measured independently of human speech. Who cares about speech as evidence of other minds? Who cares about

The mind, that ocean where each kind
Does straight its own resemblance find;
Yet it creates, transcending these,
Far other worlds, and other seas;
Annihilating all that’s made
To a green thought in a green shade.

Get in your category at birth and stay there. The theory of science in Blanchard, Bailey, and now Dreger is undefended 1930s behaviorism in aid of gender policing.

What it “means” to want to be something you are not yet is, of course, among the commonest human experiences, not “really” that difficult to understand. You were once a child, did not know “really” what it was like to be an adult, but wanted to be one. Not so difficult after all. Someone born in Mexico doesn’t “really” know what it’s like to live in the United States, but immigrates. Someone who wants a better job doesn’t “really” know what it’s like to have an MBA, but goes to get one. It’s is not rocket science. But unlike the exiguous “evidence” assembled for the Clarke Institute theory, at least it’s science.

Bailey’s book keeps emphasizing its highly scientific character. Bailey writes, for example, of “recruiting [in gay bars] research subjects for our study of drag queens and transsexuals” and about his own “recent research”; and so on throughout. Those who glory in doing scientific research had better have something to back it up. Bailey doesn’t and Dreger has not shown that he does. At a July 2003 meeting in Bloomington, Indiana, of the International Academy of Sex Research, John Bancroft, once director of the Kinsey Institute, stood up after Bailey’s abbreviated talk and said sternly, “Michael, I would caution you against calling this book ‘science’ because I have read it, and I can tell you it is not science.” Then he sat down, to stunned silence. Bailey resigned that afternoon as Secretary-Treasurer from the Academy. The sexologists had finally gotten up the courage to resist Bailey, Blanchard, and the Clarke Institute.

Dreger enthusiastically joins in advertising Bailey’s scientific standing. Practically none of her lengthy “analytic synopsis” of the book, for example, is critical of anything Bailey says. Astonishing claims such as that “transgender homosexuality is probably the most common form of homosexuality found across cultures” (p. 134, quoted by Dreger) pass smoothly without comment. (Neither Bailey nor Dreger appear to have heard of how the British Navy was governed in its prime, with “rum, buggery, and the lash.”) When Dreger simply has to admit that Bailey’s ideas are dubious, she immediately shifts the discussion to matters of how they “rubbed a lot of people the wrong way” or “offended” gender crossers. Never mind how wrong the ideas were scientifically.

Dreger accuses me of now denying what I wrote in my book, that I was sexually aroused by the thought of being a woman—“an admission it is hard to imagine her offering post-[Bailey].” This is just silly. Yes, I was aroused. So? According to the Clarke Institute theory that makes me an “autogynophile” to be classified in the *DSM-IV* with pedophiles and animal lovers. But my point has always been that it’s a mistaken theory, with no scientific basis, which has been put forward over and over, as it is in Bailey’s book and in Dreger’s account, without taking chances with contrary pieces of evidence, pieces of evidence like me. As soon as I seriously contemplated changing gender, the notion stopped being sexually arousing. Some theory. I could tell you more. Ask, doctor.

Dreger defends Bailey’s failure to request permission to use the women’s lives as he does in his book by agreeing with Bancroft that the book isn’t science. This is how Bailey defended himself on his website after the book came out, despite the heavy we-are-scientists rhetoric in the book itself. Yet, Dreger treats with the utmost respect Bailey’s generalizations on the basis of a half-dozen gender crossing prostitutes. She can’t have it both ways. Either he was doing rigorous science and therefore violated the norms of science or, he was doing casual journalism, and his views do not deserve the attention she uncritically gives. I’m not against casual journalism as an institution. On the contrary, I will take to the hills to defend it. Don’t mess with my First Amendment. But journalism differs from science as an institution, quite properly on both sides. When Dreger wants to defend Bailey, it’s “oh, he was just doing a journalistic book.” When she wants to admire his science, it’s “gosh, what persuasive scientific generalizations that gay men lisp and gender crossers are in it for sex, sex, sex.”

But set aside Bailey’s theory. Dreger’s essay is mainly not about the science. It is an exercise in political advocacy. She fashions it as a sober inquiry into the ethics of the reaction to Bailey’s book (though by the way she appears not to know anything about ethical theories and cites none of them). It’s not. It’s a very long brief for Bailey, right down to touching stories about Bailey’s children (e.g., “Bailey’s family and friends privately rallied around him”). I am appalled by James’s vulgar satire using his children. But now that we’re talking about people’s children, what about mine, who haven’t spoken to me since 1995, or allowed me to see my two grandchildren, precisely because of the sort of transphobic theories that it’s-all-about-sex which Bailey and Dreger advocate?

So the issues between us are political. I am described by Dreger as a “transgender activist.” James, who can certainly be described that way, plays a big part early on, complete with unsubstantiated suggestions that she is somehow physically dangerous. Dreger then describes at great length Kieleyka’s “remarkable sex life.” The idea is to lead with a heavy dose of the strange—consistent with the characterization early in the essay of everyone involved against Bailey as weird and dangerous and “activists”—and to leave for much later the sober

gender-crossing scientists who have taken exception to Bailey's theories. Only very late in the paper do we discover that eminent scientists like Roughgarden are part of the nutty "transgendered activists" she is going after. I am introduced as "enjoying an international reputation" literally on the next to last page. It reminds one of Bailey: make it easy; don't face the best your critics have to say.

At various points, Dreger complains that Blanchard, Bailey, and Lawrence (described sympathetically as a "physician-researcher": no "activists" work on the Bailey side of the street) are "lumped together...as a single, uniformly dangerous beast." If it's a bad idea to lump together three people who are old friends and collaborators in forwarding Blanchard's unsubstantiated theories, what's this about calling us all on the other side "transgender activists"?

I deny in particular that I worked "to ruin Bailey professionally and personally" or "to make Bailey as personally miserable as possible." I disagree with Bailey's theories and have explained repeatedly why I disagree, in print, and here again. I think his theories will result in more dead queers and I've said so (there's some "actual damage done to people"). I think his behavior from beginning to end has been disgraceful and unscholarly, and I've said that, too. What's the beef? Isn't it appropriate to criticize such work and such a person?

Not according to Dreger's ethics. I am supposed to have done something wicked by complaining through channels about Bailey's mistreatment of his victims. Dreger wrote to the appropriate parties through channels to try to persuade Northwestern's Rainbow Alliance not to invite James to speak. I did similarly. Ask again: What exactly is wrong with requesting that a book attacking gender crossers be removed from a nomination for a book prize by an organization that defends gender crossers? It's not "tantamount to censorship." Censorship is governmental interference in a free press. Bailey is portrayed as a lone hero against the government of gender crossers. I do wish, especially on April 15, that the real government were so feeble.

Dreger seems to think that it was somehow scandalous for me and others to have persuaded "Juanita" and "Cher" to complain to Northwestern University. Repeatedly, she argues that the integrity or indeed the truth of the complaint is somehow undermined because we intervened. I wonder how she views lawyers or mothers or friends who similarly intervene as persuaders in the decisions people make. Are they guilty of impropriety? And does their intervention make the decisions inauthentic? You can see that this distinguished member of the Medical Humanities and Bioethics Program at Northwestern's School of Medicine hasn't cracked a book on the humanities or on ethics. I would guess that a romantic theory of sincerity is at work in her mind, under which people never make decisions as social beings, never change their opinions, never consult, never come to see their pasts in a different light.

Dreger has a gift for self-dramatization. She portrays herself as a courageous defender, who is legitimately concerned she will suffer "personal harassment for researching and publicizing this history." She portrays herself repeatedly as writing "scholarly history" (the phrase is used four times, as though by saying that you are doing historical scholarship you can make it so). She needs to write, she says, because misunderstanding of the Bailey controversy "are adversely affecting many people's lives and actions."

I am a historian. I asked Dreger to send the paper to me. She never did, even when it was finished, though she is proud that she "solicited responses to drafts from 12 transgender activists." She would not—and she admits she would not—show me her work and allow me to criticize it, one historian to another. So she is able to characterize my views free of critique by the person most involved.

I, of course, had no wish to give her ammunition for her false case. It was apparent from the outset that Dreger was determined to tell the story as though Bailey were Galileo (she in fact uses the image, though jocularly; Blanchard is Copernicus; she, I guess, is Newton) and as though I were among the papal inquisition confining him to house arrest. The power positions of the people involved make the Bailey-as-victim story bizarre. Bailey is a tenured professor at a major university, defended stoutly by its bureaucracy; the two "activists" on which Dreger spends by far the most time (James and Kieltyka) have only the feeble power of words.

Dreger is irritated that I therefore gave her factual answers to the questions she posed ("She declined to elaborate"). Dreger evidently wished to have ample material on me like the 11 hours of interviews with Kieltyka, from which she could carefully select evidence. She asserts, for example, on the basis of a claim by Kieltyka, that Conway and I understood the alleged "sex" Bailey had with his scientific object of study to be an (unsuccessful) attempt at sex. This is mistaken, as she could have discovered had she troubled to send me the draft of her paper.

Dreger has written a political brief. One more typical example. By her own evidence—she asked Bailey (and he wouldn't answer) if Bailey *had* slept with an object of his scientific study. Much later she enthusiastically reviews the "proof" Bailey offers against the direct and precise testimony of Juanita that he had sex with her. The proof is shallow.

That is how one might characterize Dreger's tedious and tendentious "scholarly history." Lengthy but shallow.

References

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