Every once in a while we encounter individuals that strike us as extraordinary. Whether it be their remarkable creative or intellectual capabilities, or their sheer courage and force of will; there is something about these people that set them out from the rest. Annie Townsend Whitling was one such person.

Flicking through the 1908 casebook at the end of a long days research, case 7254 hit me straight between the eyes. Here was an individual who was being described in ways I had thus far not encountered. With a diagnosis of “delusional insanity” this patient was described as having “numerous delusions of a sexual nature”, “her habits are repugnant and unnatural”. I was compelled to read on.

Whitling is recorded as having the delusion that “she is a male hermaphrodite” and “is a prince of the royal blood who has been abducted as a baby”. She “wants to wear male garments or ‘kilts’ as a compromise”. Was this simply another case of mental ill health, or was there something more here. Was Whitling transgender?

It soon became apparent that Whitling was no stranger to the asylum system. Having been a volunteer patient at Gartnavel Asylum in Glasgow in 1906, they were admitted to Woodilee asylum in September 1908. However, this time incarceration had been far from voluntary, and Whitling was apprehended at a hotel in Glasgow. Whitling had now been transferred to Stirling District Asylum and was not about to go down without a fight.

The case notes are filled with recordings of Whitling’s insistence to be addressed as Rupert Victor and horror is expressed at their constant discussion of male genitalia and refusal to wear female clothing. Additionally, it is documented that Whitling believed themselves to have been brought up the wrong gender. Furthermore, Whitling’s persistence in the calling out of the overall prejudice, discrimination and ill treatment of fellow patients is also recorded. To tell the truth, Whitling seemed to me the first sane and sensible patient I encountered up until this point. This was not the behaviour of a wild and crazy madwoman, but of a person at the end of their tether, frustrated at the constant denial of who they were.

However, perhaps I would have thought otherwise, if it were not for the numerous letters pasted throughout this case. Written in beautiful script, Whitling’s letter’s by the very fact that I had access to them, were never delivered to their intended recipients. They are long, coherent, educated and at many points quite philosophical. In some ways they were ahead of their time, as Whitling talks about gender identity and what it means to be a man or woman.

Most fascinating is their contemplation of a third sex. Simply put, male = ‘a’, and female = ‘b’ and therefore not one and the same. In the case of the hermaphrodite then, in the same way that ‘a’ cannot equal ‘b’ and vice versa, then a hermaphrodite cannot equal either male or female. Therefore they must constitute a third category, ‘c’ and therefore a third sex. It was in this third position that Whitling believed themselves to be.
The casenotes reveal a gradual decline in Whitling’s ‘deviant behaviour’ and they were discharged, recovered, after nearly 4 years, on 6th June 1912. Having seen how many others died in the asylum that year, and indeed, every other year, this was a relief. However, at what cost did this come?

A beacon hope, in the form of a letter written three weeks after discharge renewed my optimism in this situation. Written to the asylum physician, Whitling, on the surface it seems to concede their diagnosis in hindsight and apologises for her behaviour. However, this letter lacks the conviction and eloquence of former ones and seems to merely repeat back what the doctor’s want to hear. It almost seems a little too earnest and well behaved to be true. However, it does retain the intelligence and wit seen previously. Whitling cleverly sidesteps the question of marriage and an acceptable expression of sexuality by saying, “I am verging on forty years, marriage will be for all time be beyond my pale, and hence surely sex should be of relative little interest”. The deference expressed is tinged with a level of sarcasm and at points very nearly oversteps the mark of acceptability.

Overall, we will never be able to answer with entire certainty as to whether Annie Townsend Whitling was Transgender. I am convinced enough by what I have read to believe that they were – my use of gender neutral language here is in respect for that. In a world where the language to talk about transgender issues was non existent, and individuals were put away for expressing themselves honestly and authentically, Whitling created a system of personal reasoning and comprehension of self. Whitling is an inspiration to me, and I long to find out where they went and what they did next!

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Male. Female. Hermaphrodite.

a. b.

... a is not b. And more than a, again is not a; also: b is not a, and more than b, again is not b. A Hermaphrodite cannot equal a + b as science loosely reasons. Neither can a Hermaphrodite equal a or b, as law loosely reasons; but one must constitute a new, or third quantity c, i.e. Hermaphrodites inconstitutes 3#3c.

The above note a has given me trouble recently.