

What's in a Name?

Amy K. Guenther

The name "bearded lady" is complicated and often problematic. On the one hand, *The Bearded Lady Project* playfully alludes to the historical performance of the bearded lady figure, most notably in nineteenth-century circuses and sideshows, who disrupted traditional Western ideas about gender. By temporarily wearing a fake beard, the twenty-first-century women of this project call attention to a history of women disrupting gender stereotypes: women accused of possessing too many "masculine" traits such as an education, a desire for independence, and the pursuit of nonstereotypical gender roles and careers. On the other hand, the actual lived experiences of women with beards today and throughout history reflect very real, often cruel consequences. Moreover, facial hair carries significant meanings for affirming, hiding, and/or denying one's gender identity in a society that (still) strictly enforces expectations with regard to gender. Therefore, we must also examine our use of the bearded lady figure to acknowledge both the powerful symbolism and the oftentimes dangerous lived reality associated with the image at the center of this project.

Though most people associate bearded ladies with nineteenth-century circuses and sideshows, their history actually goes back thousands of years. As early as the fifth century CE, Roman author Macrobius referenced a statue of a bearded Venus on the island of Cyprus in his collection of Roman lore *Saturnalia*. Many early female Christian saints also reportedly possessed beards. According to legend, Saint Galla (sixth century CE) grew a beard after being widowed. The story of Saint Paula (fourth century CE) tells of [8] a young virgin who grew a beard to deter a would-be rapist. References to Saint Wilgefortis (fourteenth century CE) relate the tale of a young pagan princess in Portugal who grew a beard to avoid getting married and

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was subsequently crucified by her father. In England, she was known as Saint Uncumber and was a symbol of women "unencumbering" themselves of husbands. Though the story behind the bearded Venus is unclear, bearded Christian saints tend to be associated with women's refusals to get married and enter the patriarchal order.¹

Unfortunately, traditional U.S. society today finds the bearded lady no less condemnable in her disruptions of standards of beauty and (white) femininity. For many women, facial hair is a source of shame that they secretly try to obliterate with painful, expensive, and time-consuming procedures. Media and advertising still represent facial hair on women as an imperfection that needs "fixing" since, they suggest, facial hair only grows on men and is a symbol of masculinity. They further assert that a woman's facial hair makes her somehow abnormal, less feminine, and thus less beautiful. Indeed, the presence of facial hair on women disrupts an easily discernible gender binary between men and women. Even the *Oxford English Dictionary* denotes that they occur on "an adult man's face." Moreover, the *OED* indicates that (men's) beards symbolize "age, experience, and expertise,"² reflecting an explicit and positive association of men, expertise, and beards.

However, there are artists and social media stars attempting to redefine, subvert, normalize, and/or even feminize women with beards. Several bearded performance artists have reasserted their control over the bearded lady narrative in twenty-first-century circuses and sideshows, such as Jennifer Miller, founder of Circus Amok, which specializes in political circus performances. Social media has also given a new visibility to women with hirsutism, a medical condition marked by excessive hair growth, especially on the face and chest, who have chosen to stop removing hair.³ The most famous perhaps is Harnaam Kaur, who set a Guinness World Record in 2016 for being the youngest woman to grow a full beard and who now works as a

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model and body positivity activist.⁴ Unfortunately, however, social media also has expanded the ways women with beards can be shamed and criticized through hurtful comments, messages, and emails. Increased visibility and positive representations can also bring increased harassment.

Moreover, as LGBTQIA+ people become more visible, beards and "bearded lady" have taken on even more complicated meanings in terms of gender identity and sexual orientation. For example, historically, "beard" has been used as a slang term to describe a heterosexual relationship used to hide the sexuality of at least one of the partners involved. In this usage, the need for a beard results from living in a homophobic society and/or [9] culture and can have negative emotional repercussions for both parties. Whereas this definition uses "beard" in a metaphorical sense, the physical reality of beards continues to hold very charged connotations for gender expression and identity. For instance, some trans women discuss growing large beards before transitioning in an attempt to hide their gender identity from others and, often, themselves. Facial stubble and hair might also cause trans women to experience a psychological condition known as dysphoria, which, in relation to gender, causes "anxiety and/or discomfort regarding one's sex assigned at birth."⁵ Facial hair on trans women might also prevent them from being read as women by some. Yet for many trans men, the growth of facial hair can be empowering, gender affirming, and/or part of passing. Facial hair, especially when contrasted with more feminine expressions of make-up and dress,⁶ can be used as a way of expressing nonbinary gender identities that are both male and female, neither, or a combination of the two. However, "bearded lady" is still used as a slur for trans people and a derogatory insult for women who can grow facial hair; just as "woman" describes a diverse category of people existing at the intersection of many different identities such as race, gender, and sexuality, there is no one singular way of thinking among people who identify as queer or transgender. For some,

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"bearded lady" is a term to be taken back, much like the term "queer," while for others it will always be offensive.

The bearded lady, it seems, is still a complicated reality in the twenty-first century. As metaphor, she disrupts society's ideas of what gender is and what a woman should be and challenges patriarchal assumptions. As lived reality, people with facial hair who are not cis men (people whose gender identity [man/male] matches their sex assigned at birth [male]) still face very real social stigmas with material consequences. The name "bearded lady" plays into complicated and problematic histories that have challenged and subverted women but also caused pain and shame and reinforced gender binaries. In demonstrating the ridiculousness of associating expertise, authority, and virility with male facial hair, *The Bearded Lady Project* empowers women in traditionally male-dominated fields and challenges the hyperfeminized standard of beauty for women still portrayed in the media. *The Bearded Lady Project* documentary and its accompanying portraits illuminate the gendered stereotypes and assumptions associated with paleontology, with implications for other academic disciplines. In playing the bearded lady, we look for new possibilities in what facial hair signifies, whom exactly it benefits, and how it disrupts obsolete gender standards. [10]

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¹. For further reading, see Mark Albert Johnston, "Bearded Women in Early Modern England." *SEL* 47.1 (2007): 1-28; Alexander H. Krappe, "The Bearded Venus." *Folk-Lore* 56.4 (1945): 325-335. Lewis Wallace, "Bearded Woman, Female Christ: Gendered Transformations

in the Legends and Cult of Saint Wilgefortis." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 30.1 (2014): 43-63.

² "beard, n." OED Online: Oxford University Press, accessed September 30, 2018.

³ Roughly 10 percent of people with ovaries have a medical condition called Polycystic Ovary Syndrome (PCOS). PCOS is the leading cause of hirsutism. Approximately 70 percent of people with PCOS have hirsutism with varying degrees of hair growth. "Polycystic Ovary Syndrome," Office of Women's Health, last modified April 25, 2019, <https://www.womenshealth.gov/a-z-topics/polycystic-ovary-syndrome#17>; "Polycystic Ovary Syndrome (PCOS)," The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, accessed April 25, 2019, <https://www.acog.org/Patients/FAQs/Polycystic-Ovary-Syndrome-PCOS>.

⁴ Meredith Clark, "5 Women with PCOS Explain Why They Choose to Celebrate Their Facial Hair," *Allure*, May 30, 2018, <https://www.allure.com/story/women-with-pcos-facial-hair-beard-interviews>; Janell M. Hickman, "Instagrammers Challenge Body and Facial Hair Stigma," *Teen Vogue*, March 28, 2017, <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/girls-challenging-body-and-facial-hair-stigma>.

⁵ "Definitions," Trans Student Educational Resources, accessed July 24, 2019, <https://transstudent.org/about/definitions/>

⁶ There is no single trans or queer experience. Much of the discourse surrounding these identities happens very fluidly over social media, which would be impossible to adequately cite here. Here are a few of the articles I found helpful in thinking through the complexities surrounding facial hair, gender identity, gender expression, and sexuality: Galen Mitchell, "I Was a Bearded Lady—I Just Didn't Know It Yet," *TransSubstantiation*, May 16, 2017, <https://transsubstantiation.com/i-was-a-bearded-lady-i-just-didnt-know-it-yet-1a1ba2b97c59>. Dan Avery, "Trans Women Taught Me What a Denial Beard Is," *NewNowNext*, Dec. 26, 2017 <http://www.newnownext.com/denial-beards-transgender-women/12/2017/>. "I Like to Consider Myself Genderful": Interview with Bearded Lady Little Bear Schwarz," *Ravishly*, accessed July 24, 2019, <https://www.ravishly.com/2015/01/07/interview-bearded-lady-little-bear-shwarz>; Natalie Wynn, "Transtrenders," *ContraPoints*, July 1, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EdvM_pRfuFM.