
The Phallus: the Art of Rejection

According to Jack Halberstam in his book *The Queer Art of Failure*, “the queer art of failure turns on the impossible, the improbable, the unlikely, and the unremarkable. It quietly loses, and in losing it imagines other goals for life, for love, for art, and for being” . In *The Danish Girl* by David Ebershoff, protagonist Lili Elbe experiences the queer art of failure within her own body when the womb Professor Bolk implants is rejected—a procedure that was considered impossible, improbable, and unlikely by many characters in the novel is proved to be so. Halberstam’s chapter “Dude, Where’s My Phallus?” identifies a phenomena that may explain Lili’s failed organ transplant: women cannot be the phallus, so art portrays them rejecting the phallus (along with other organs). In this essay, I intend to examine the male force on the female body and the consequent repudiation of the phallic power; specifically, the force of the medically ambitious Professor Bolk in Ebershoff’s *The Danish Girl* and Lili’s experience with the rejection of her uterus and her forgetfulness.

Although Lili’s desire to be a “real woman” is evident throughout the novel, she falls victim to phallic force when the concept of bodily alterations is thrust upon her by Professor Bolk, a doctor who lost his first opportunity to transform a man into a woman and eagerly seeks a second chance. Lili’s desire to undergo Professor Bolk’s suggested changes is inspired and encouraged by other male characters in the novel such as Henrik, Hans, and Carlisle. Lili is intrigued by the idea of having her genitals surgically altered, but she thinks nothing of having a fully-functioning female reproductive system until after her first surgery when Professor Bolk discovers a pair of underdeveloped ovaries and tells her that he can make her even more of a woman.

After the successful ovarian transplant, Lili does not make plans to go further—until Henrik proposes marriage and she feels the pressure to make herself fertile. Lili consequently plans to go to Dresden to see Professor Bolk for one final operation, in which he will “make a man pregnant” with his medical knowledge (Ebershoff, 248). While Halberstam claims that stupidity is forgiven in men, intelligence is rewarded, and Professor Bolk wishes for his intelligence to be rewarded . In *The Danish Girl*, Professor Bolk becomes the image of phallic power as he attempts to manipulate Lili’s body (and her burning desire to be a woman) for his own medical success. If stupidity is the only way male characters can be vulnerable, as Halberstam claims, then the portrayal of mass intelligence is the only way they can be strong . Professor Bolk’s desire for a successful career requires him to use his phallic power as a weapon and Lili, as a woman, is unfortunately is victim. As he plants ideas in her head and uses her as his medical experiment, Professor Bolk also forces his masculinity upon her, causing her to physically and mentally reject the phallus.

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Lili is cognizant of the failure of her uterine transplant after the operation, but she experiences significant physical and mental debilitation during this time, which is likely the feminine reaction to castration and the force of the phallus. After the operation, the narrator states that “for nearly six weeks she had loll[ed] in and out of consciousness, spitting up in her sleep, hemorrhaging between her legs and in her abdomen” (Ebershoff, 263). Lili later overhears her ex-brother-in-law, Carlisle, explaining to a family friend that despite Professor Bolk’s best efforts, the operation has failed and the uterus will have to be removed. Her body is physically rejecting phallic power by rejecting the uterus that Professor Bolk implanted: his attempt to turn a man into a woman are not for Lili’s sake, but for his own success and fame. Once Lili’s penis is removed and she is freed from the burden of being a woman stuck in a man’s body, she begins to experience the suffocation of male power and mentally rejects it. Her forgetfulness begins after her “castration” as a reaction to her womanhood, but the rejection of her uterus is her defense against the exploitation of her body. As soon as Lili becomes a “real woman,” she becomes the victim of man. Her body rejecting the uterus serves as a metaphor for her rejection of the expectation that she should succumb to male power as a woman.

When Lili undergoes sex-reassignment surgery and loses her penis, she loses her defense against phallic power and must react accordingly by forgetting and rejecting. According to Halberstam, “the anti-archive of death, the anarchic space of forgetting, spurs an ‘archive fever,’ a will to memory which has both conservative (literally) and revolutionary potential and ‘verges on radical evil’ . While Lili struggles to connect the dots between her past and current self and her desires, her memory is compromised by both her past suffering and her current struggle to fight male power. Halberstam makes an interesting connection between suffering and forgetting, which is applicable to Lili in several ways. While she works to create new memories in her new life and forgetting, albeit contingent and illogical, proves to be a crucial part of her new life. Physically and mentally blocking phallic power is necessary for Lili’s survival as a woman.

Works Cited

1. Ebershoff, David. *The Danish Girl: A Novel*. New York City, New York: Penguin Books, 2015. Print.
2. Halberstam, Jack. *The Queer Art of Failure*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2011. Print.

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