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The Prince: Trans Politics on the British stage

Abigail Thorn has been making a name for herself as an essayist and actress through her YouTube channel Philosophy Tube since 2013. Her body of work is highly influenced by her studies in philosophy and acting. She uses both skill sets to cover a broad range of topics in video essays centered around the politics of modern life. In 2021 she released the video *Identity: A Trans Coming Out Story* in which she announced to the world that she is a transgender woman. In the years since, Thorn has articulated a very radical perspective on transness.

Thorn stated that she was very aware that she would become “the trans princess of TERF island” (Stratis) once she came out, referring to how she is now one of the most visible and well known trans women in the UK. As a Londoner, Thorn lives and works at the center of the ongoing moral panic surrounding trans people within the UK. Trans exclusive radical feminists (or TERFs) have been receiving increasing amounts of attention as their movement gained traction in the 2010s (John). Many prominent TERFs are British, earning the UK the nickname “TERF island” in certain online trans circles. *Harry Potter* author J.K. Rowling put anti-trans feminism into the spotlight after she publicly came to Maya Forstater’s defense when the latter lost her job after making a series of transphobic statements in 2019 (Morrow). Rowling has continued to spread transphobic rhetoric in the name of women’s liberation on her social media feeds ever since, most recently denying that research books about transgender people were burned by Nazis during the Holocaust (Haile). Meanwhile, British trans people are subjected to

medical gatekeeping that prevents them from getting referred to gender affirming care clinics and years-long wait times after being referred to one of the 8 gender identity clinics in the UK (Talen 2021). Trans people are subjected to discriminatory guidelines when legally changing their gender. For instance, trans people are required to include 2 separate medical reports from different doctors detailing the specifics of their transition to acquire a Gender Recognition Certificate (GOV.UK). In comparison, I was not required to provide any medical information at all when I went through the same process in the US and in France. Additionally, trans people in the UK are twice as likely to be the victim of a crime in England and Wales and are more likely to experience social and economic disenfranchisement (John). As a result, Thorn's work is highly influenced by and often is a direct response to British transphobia.

It's this context that informed the specific choices Thorn made in her social and legal transition. For several years after coming out, Thorn refused to publicly give out any details about the medical specifics of her transition. When faced with the question of how she has managed to look so different, Thorn would playfully suggest that her body, face, and voice "just did that" (Philosophy Tube). Transgender bodies are often subjected to a very invasive level of voyeuristic interest. In my experience, even the most well-meaning people tend to feel overly comfortable asking me about what surgeries I've had. I tend to give answers to people who ask me questions out of genuine curiosity because in a way it feels like the responsibility to make sure that people get accurate information about trans people falls on my shoulders - if I don't set the record straight, who will? Thorn's choice to set that boundary for herself is radical because she is placing her personhood above that unfair sense of responsibility that is placed on us. Furthermore, her coyness challenges the audience to think about why they're so interested in knowing the answers to those questions in the first place. Why shouldn't "my voice just did that"

be a satisfying answer to why her voice has changed timbre? In this way Thorn cleverly challenges the notion that transition is rooted in artifice. She isn't *putting on a girl voice*, that just is her voice.

After coming out, Thorn chose to keep her pre-transition videos up on her channel because she believes that "being trans isn't anything to be ashamed of" (Philosophy Tube). This choice directly challenges how for centuries, the most viable way to be trans was to change your name, move far away, and never tell anyone about who you used to be. Natalie Wynn, a well-known YouTube philosopher who is also a trans woman, chose to take her pre-transition videos down, instead making them available on her website in transcript form. Thorn's choice to proudly claim her identity as a woman while simultaneously maintaining a catalog of how she used to look and sound is beautifully bold.

Thorn also penned an essay challenging the construction of the diagnostic criteria of "gender dysphoria." Gender dysphoria is the diagnosis that trans people in the UK have to obtain before being able to access gender affirming care and being able to legally change their gender. Thorn argues that since gender dysphoria is a category that was invented by cisgender doctors, it serves primarily as a gatekeeping tool to exclude trans people who don't fit a narrow idea of how trans people should behave from being able to transition (Thorn). She describes dysphoria as a sort of self-fulfilling prophecy, where trans patients are encouraged to essentially memorize the narrative that cis doctors are expecting to see and present themselves in that way when trying to access life-saving care. Thorn rightfully critiques this system as one that exists to limit trans people's bodily autonomy and discredit their self-knowledge. Furthermore, she argues that any sort of gender related bodily discomfort, whether experienced by a cis or a trans person, can be understood as gender dysphoria. This argument is particularly incisive because of the years-long

ongoing discourse within the trans community about whether or not someone can be trans without experiencing gender dysphoria. Thorn entirely discredits that discursive paradigm in favor of a more politically informed line of thought all in the aim of liberating trans and cis people from medical gatekeeping as well as the oppressive structure of gender.

Understanding Thorn's stance on her own transness as well as her radical thought on transgender liberation can help us better understand how she approached writing *The Prince*, her debut play. *The Prince* is a sci-fi medieval epic in which two modern day trans women, Sam and Jen, find themselves trapped in a multiverse made up of the complete works of Shakespeare. They interact with characters from *Henry the IV Part One* as they search for an exit back to the real world. The play opened at Southwark Playhouse in London in 2022 and was later made available as a video on Nebula, an online creator-owned streaming platform. Thorn starred in the show as Hotspur, the son of King Henry IV, here reimagined as a trans woman so deep in the closet she hasn't realized she isn't a man yet.

The Prince stands out because of the specific choices Thorn makes in how the show is realized. Even the small choice to refer to Hotspur with she/her pronouns in the stage directions throughout the show is remarkable. It informs the reader via word-of-God that Hotspur's womanhood is an immutable fact of the text. Thorn's choice to play Hotspur makes the incongruence between Hotspur's true self (a woman) and the way Hotspur is perceived by others in her life (as a man) immediately visually apparent to the audience. It's a choice that boldly stands against the long tradition of transgender women being played by cisgender men in drag (see *The Danish Girl*, *Twin Peaks*, *Dallas Buyers Club* etc). In fact, Thorn specifies in the stage directions that all three transgender women characters must be played by transgender women.

Hotspur, Jen, and Sam are three trans women with very different experiences of transness. Jen is from a younger generation than Sam, and Hotspur is still in the midst of realizing she is not a man. In this way, Thorn avoids tokenizing a single character as *the trans character*. In an interview carried out by fellow trans YouTuber Jessie Earl, Thorn describes how British “transgender plays” will often feature one nonbinary character who was assigned female at birth (AFAB) and an otherwise cisgender cast. In her eyes, trans women or otherwise transgender people who were assigned male at birth (AMAB) carry a specific stigma on the British stage. She describes how AFAB nonbinary people are often cast as trans women because they are seen as a “safer” choice. Her choice to write and stage a show that centers trans women is radical in the context of British theater. This choice also helps humanize Hotspur, who Thorn describes as “problematic.” Thorn says “Hotspur is misogynistic, homophobic, transphobic, but we see where that comes from. We see why she has this attitude, and we see the change in her” (Earl). Hotspur is able to be problematic because she doesn’t have to carry the weight of being the sole representation of the trans community.

Overall, these choices contribute to a story that centers a transgender perspective but has universal applicability. Thorn explains in her interview with Earl that to her, *The Prince* is about “the roles we play for other people.” She specifies that that is a very queer experience, but her work is attempting to explore how everyone feels constrained by the roles placed upon them by society. This idea is especially seen in a brief scene between Jen and Lady Kate (Hotspur’s wife). Kate is a cisgender woman lamenting how she was raised “to shoot, to think, to write” but after her brother was born and became the family heir, she was relegated back to a more standard role for women. “I am a wife,” she says. “Now just a wife.” In response, Jen says: “It’s tough when people see you only in relation to men” (Thorn, Act I Scene VIII). Jen listens to Kate vent her

frustrations about being thought to be lesser than men, and the two women bond over their shared struggle within the patriarchy. Although Kate's experience of womanhood is considered to be more "normal" than Jen's, Kate is still able to learn something about womanhood from a trans woman. It's scenes like these that summarize Thorn's radical, liberatory, and most importantly empathetic ethos.

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