

At Least for the Moment?

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Ellen Goodman is an institution at the *Boston Globe* and one of the nation's most recognized liberal columnists. She has a keen eye for detail, which often makes her columns interesting, and she is an unreconstructed liberal and feminist, undoubtedly shaped by her education in the 1960s at Radcliffe College and her personal experiences.

In her [column](#) published today Goodman addresses the controversy surrounding Thomas Beatie, the "man" who gave birth to a baby girl just weeks ago. Here is how Goodman described the situation:

For those of you who do not watch "Oprah" or read tabloids, Beatie is "The World's First Pregnant Man." While the title of "first" is in dispute, Beatie is certainly the most public transgender poster parent to have a baby bump plastered across the media. And now - pass the cigars - he has delivered the baby.

Unlike Oprah, I will spare you many of the medical details. Let us just say that Thomas was born Tracy and socialized enough into a traditional female role to be a finalist in the Miss Hawaii Teen USA contest. Then, a decade ago she had what we used to call a sex change operation but what some now call sexual realignment surgery. She had her body realigned to fit her self-image.

Goodman's writing is crisp and concise, but she runs right over some basic issues that are hard to miss. The first is the assumption that "sexual realignment surgery" can actually change a person's sex. The other (and obvious fact) is that Thomas Beatie is *still* functioning as a woman, even to the extent of retaining her reproductive capacity.

In other words, she had her physical characteristics changed — at least some visible markers of gender — so that she would appear as a man rather than as a woman. But — and this is crucial — the baby did not emerge from a man's womb. There is no such thing. The baby, we might summarize, was not fooled.

The state of Oregon now recognizes Beattie as a man and many neighbors apparently assumed the bearded person was a man, but all this just adds to the confusion — and explains why this pregnancy ended up on *Oprah*, the television equivalent of a London tabloid.

Even Goodman understands that this case represents a confusion of elements, and that the parents will, in her words, "have an awful lot more 'splaining to do to their child." As she explains:

It is only recently that we began to look at the human body as a template to be altered as we please. I'm not comparing sexual reassignment surgery to liposuction, but if Thomas removed his breasts to fit the male model, how many women enlarge them to fit the female model? For that matter, it's only recently that we could reach into the pillbox and pull out male and female hormones.

Add to that the expanding gamut of reproductive technologies. Over Beatie's 34-year lifespan we have subdivided the word "mother" into its many parts. We now have genetic, gestational, and birth mothers, as well as the mothers who actually raise children. We have egg donors and surrogates. Grandmothers have carried their own grandchildren. Sisters have delivered their own nieces.

We are redefining what it means to be human, at least as understood within the culture, and we are making a mess of things. In the name of sensitivity and worshipping at the altar of undiluted personal autonomy, we are encouraging people to experiment with their lives by the most grotesque and extreme means. There is no limit to where this can take us. *Oprah* has also done shows on children — even very young children — who think they have been assigned the wrong body. Oprah Winfrey, true to form, chastised parents who do not want to encourage this self-discovery.

The most telling part of Ellen Goodman's column was its conclusion: "As for the baby? It's A Girl! At least for the moment."

At least for the moment? That is the perfect way for Goodman to end her column, for it is where her logic inevitably leads. At least for the moment.

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