

## Man-Made Woman



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## The Dialectics of Cross-Dressing

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**PlutoPress**  
[www.plutobooks.com](http://www.plutobooks.com)



First published 2017 by Pluto Press  
345 Archway Road, London N6 5AA

[www.plutobooks.com](http://www.plutobooks.com)

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 0 7453 3713 5 Hardback

ISBN 978 0 7453 3712 8 Paperback

ISBN 978 1 7868 0141 8 PDF eBook

ISBN 978 1 7868 0143 2 Kindle eBook

ISBN 978 1 7868 0142 5 EPUB eBook

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources. Logging, pulping and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental standards of the country of origin.

Typeset by Stanford DTP Services, Northampton, England

Simultaneously printed in the United Kingdom and United States of America



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# What's in a Dress?

## *Out of the Bat Cave*

Without giving prior notice, on 27 July 2015, after a lifetime of looking and dressing as a man in public, I came to work, the University of Auckland where I lecture in sociology, wearing full makeup, a blouse, a black skirt that ended above the knee, pantyhose<sup>1</sup> and court shoes. I walked down the steps of a lecture theatre in front of a hundred or so seated students and, without making any reference to what I had on, gave a lecture on popular culture. Cross-dressing at home had not, as I imagined, prepared me for the effect this change would have on my own sensibilities and relationships to men and women, colleagues, students, friends and strangers. I don't subscribe to essentialist notions of gender, sexuality, or identity. Yet in those places that seem relatively safe in which I do wander dressed in women's clothes, I feel more at ease in myself, and my sense of alienation in the world appears, if only momentarily, to diminish. People relate to me differently too and, adjusting to this change, I in turn relate to them differently and see myself in a different way. A shift in perspective has made me more aware of the depths of misogyny in our society but also more cognisant of assumptions I'd made about gender. I didn't cross that threshold as a one-off performance nor, originally, did I expect it would be a permanent change of clothes. I envisaged dressing as a woman occasionally, regularly at first for people to get used to it, but a little less frequently after a while. I expected the novelty would wear off. But it hasn't. Blockages in my psyche that I attribute to a lifelong investment in masculine presentations are unplugged and now that they are, I wouldn't want to plug them up again. The change that that first act of 'dressing' has brought about is now, two years later, evidently an integral part of my life. And my mind is still awirl with the implications of this.



People ask, so how did the students react? The fact the question is asked at all underlines the reason this book needs to be written: that for all the media attention on trans celebrities and trans issues, this conventional style of clothing, a westernised feminine aesthetic, is nonetheless anything but conventional when worn openly, without allusions to parody, by a man. The question that male-to-female (MtF) cross-dressing raises is why, some fifty or so years after the sexual revolution, does a man in any item of adornment identified as feminine, or more specifically *for women*, still fascinate and disturb? The day I went to work dressed as a woman, the cat bolted from the bag, and so, with nothing now to hide, I can offer frank and unvarnished reflections on what it means to be a male who loves to wear (feminine) women's clothes, shoes and makeup and what happens when you do so openly. But this is a topic not so much about the individual as the society the individual has internalised. If my personal anecdotes, observations and reflections since dressing openly are to tell us anything, they must be considered alongside the society that makes my presentation unusual. It requires that we get beneath the surface of appearances. To this end, I turn to theories that enable us to shed critical light on human subjectivity, the material circumstances through which we make sense of our lives and the forces that stir inside us. I speak as a 'cross-dresser', gender 'non-normative', or, loosely defined, 'trans', 'gender queer' or 'gender variant' (all terms in my opinion are in one way or another problematic, including of course 'cross-dresser'), who was born and raised in a (westernised) capitalist society in which the norms and values of that society have through conquest and colonisation been imposed on the world. This is the hegemonic context in which from the perspective of a person, defined male, born in London into a white working-class family and now an academic working in New Zealand, I feel authorised to speak. Our relationship to gender and sexuality is of course complex and there are many different layers of human experience that require elucidation beyond what a book like this can achieve. But layers can nonetheless be sampled and the materials analysed to turn a personal story which seems trivial in isolation into a book of sociological relevance. I hope to demonstrate through the course of six chapters why male-to-female cross-dressing matters to us all.

When I was a little boy, still in my shorts, I dreamt of having my own Bat Cave. In my dream, I would slide down a pole hidden in my

bedroom and enter a space full of women's clothes, boots, makeup and so forth that I would put on and roam around in freely. Later I would dream of a scenario such as the one in the film *I Am Legend* where Will Smith finds himself to be alone in the world. I would raid department stores and dress openly knowing there was nobody there to judge me. My childhood memories are full of examples of desires, which I felt a need to repress, for feminine things I wanted to wear. When I was 4, my older sister forced me to wear pink lipstick – I ran crying from the bathroom, the scene of my makeover. A year later at a male friend's house, I was playing a game that involved wearing lipstick. I refused to put it on; I wanted to, but the fear of my mother and older siblings finding out was enough to stop me. Around the same time, a female friend across the road showed off her new ankle boots. I couldn't take my eyes off them. Desires as trivial as these were repressed because they conflicted with gendered norms I was conscious of even at the age of 4. My story is not unusual.

When sequestered in the home, cross-dressing was like having a hobby one felt embarrassed about. Imagine being an adult into Lego. You buy a bucket of Lego on the pretext it is for someone else, a child; back home, when nobody's around, you pour the Lego out of the box in which you store your collection onto the carpet to play with. Once done, you guiltily scoop it hurriedly back into the box and, having double- and even triple-checked nothing's left lying around, hide it all under the bed. Occasionally, when the guilt really gets the better of you, you throw the box and all its contents into a bin far away from home knowing that you'll probably be buying more again later. Now that I dress outside of the home, there's nothing to hide, nor anything to feel guilty about. So I dress in women's clothes as often as possible, to the extent that colleagues are surprised to see me in men's clothes. The balance appears to have shifted. Now it feels like I'm cross-dressing when presenting as a man, just as it does when I dress as a woman, which is one of the reasons I use the description 'crisscross-dresser': the term invokes the idea that gender is in permanent negation and does not, like the term 'cross-dresser', imply that one is simply putting on and taking off a mask. All presentations are in this respect masks, with no authentic sex or gender beneath them (more on which later). For me, gender is now in permanent tension, from a masculine aesthetic to a feminine one – man-made woman, woman-made man.

While from an early age I wanted to decorate my body in objects that society labels *for* women, it took almost twenty years before I could freely express that desire among friends and girlfriends, and another twenty years to pluck up the courage to dress publicly as a woman in broad daylight. Fear of ridicule was one factor, another was the sense of shame for what I desired, a shame that issues from what in patriarchal society women have come to represent, and a fear of how men in particular would respond were I to dress openly as a woman. Nowadays, in many countries, you will not be arrested for cross-dressing, but it is, nonetheless, policed. Your family and friends stand on duty. They are volunteers of the gender constabulary that you daily encounter. Raw, vulnerable, exposed, there are men, women and children in your head and all around you. Their eyes track the male-to-female cross-dresser while the majority of women where I live, frequently the object of the male gaze, are unlikely to be noticed simply for wearing men's clothes. Visibility is not the issue. The issue is that you are reminded daily by the obvious reactions of others that what you represent for them is unusual and, moreover, because of what you know about our society, that some of those reactions are likely to be hostile. It used to matter to me what strangers thought. My skin has thickened over these two years. It's what those strangers *do* that concerns me now and, without knowing how they tick, caution is required.

Some years ago, on a London Underground train, I sat opposite a businessman, ordinary in appearance except for one thing: in place of the usual cotton sock, his ankle was unmistakably sheathed in sheer nylon hosiery, not dress socks. The gaze of every passenger sooner or later fixed upon his ankle, their expressions sometimes contorted as if to demonstrate to others their distaste for what they'd seen. (Car drivers who think I can't see them sometimes contort their faces too.) It seems that even a minor deviation from a masculine norm provokes a reaction. For example, my red-varnished long nails are done professionally with shellac for durability and so cannot be removed when I cross-dress as a man. People stare, some make enquiries and even express admiration, but they react nonetheless. So would I.

It's not difficult to notice when pointed out to you how unusual it is for a man to wear anything that has been signified feminine. And I don't mean scarves or 'man' bags, impoverished examples of men 'being in touch with their femininity'. I mean things that are labelled *for* women

but which men could also get uses out of, a *handbag* for example, dresses, even pantyhose, or makeup to stylise their appearance. When I say 'women's' or feminine things, I refer to those items, accoutrements, affects and so forth that are emblematic of what people identify with (a westernised form of) femininity, endlessly referenced and reproduced in the imagery of the beauty and fashion industry. Women do of course dress in many different ways and 'femininity' is not intrinsically female or necessarily what is represented as femininity in popular culture. However, it's the strong association, formed in the mind, of 'woman' with items such as dresses, lipsticks and pantyhose – items that are emblematic of my style – that makes them unambiguously unmanly. As with lipstick and pantyhose, in the world I was brought up in 'dress' denotes 'woman' and so the qualification 'woman's dress' is not required.

We tend to focus our criticisms of masculinity on angry white men, the 'Alpha' male and dominant men in general, including those who in their appearance are seemingly effete. While I'd choose the company of 'new' man over Alpha male anytime, new man with his man bag is still reproducing masculinity, not negating it. It's patriarchy with a human face. The two great recently departed gender-defying icons of the pop world, Bowie and Prince, did both of course wear things emblematic of women. They both wore colourful makeup, heels and more. But they were never considered to be cross-dressers, or trans, or women, or even feminine: their androgyny, such that it can be called that, was powerfully inflected with masculine traits to the extent that they were unambiguously men who no doubt would've relieved themselves in the men's washroom. That we celebrate these great songwriters, musicians and performers and moreover mourn their loss for such reasons, underlines that they were still nonetheless exceptional in their relationship to gender. If the way they dressed was closer to the norm, there would still be a book to write but the criticisms of men would likely have to be toned down. There's nothing particularly singular about what I wear. They are after all mainstream (women's) fashions. It's nonetheless considered newsworthy.<sup>2</sup> By being in the public eye, Prince was able to make a statement through his appearance. Though nothing like on the scale of Prince, that my appearance generates media attention is all the more reason to point the finger at society, and sometimes give it too.

Primed to stoke a prurient interest in the lives of those formerly identifying as men, the media encourages transwomen to play to the gallery with their inexhaustible supplies of coming-out stories, personal motivations, challenges and traumas. As one study found (Capuzza, 2014), news stories are usually sympathetic towards transgender people who identify with the gender binary because they are 'trying to be like us'. Gender becomes something like a lost limb that, with the aid of science, its victim artificially recovers, thus enabling them to lead a normal life which their audiences take for granted. These affirmative stories and images also reinforce the idea that society is at ease with itself and has no hang-ups or problems in respect to those who express themselves in seemingly unusual ways. It is a fabrication of reality as thin and transparent as the pantyhose that sheathe my legs. Shallowness is to be combated by moving critique away from the individual and ripping a ruinous ladder through the discourses and ideologies that obscure the gendered relations of domination that structure our lives. To invoke a masculine imagery, the battle is fought on multiple fronts. The theatres of war are stages towards a final confrontation against patriarchal-capitalism.

As Maria Mies (1986) points out, if we are to reject the idea that women's subordination is biologically determined, then so we must also reject the idea that men's violence is biologically determined. Women's subordination can be explained, she argues, through patriarchy. The classic image of patriarchy is that of a household in which the male is the breadwinner who dominates a female partner and kids. He is the authority who lays down the law. Thus, with the breakdown of the nuclear family and growth of single-parent households, same-sex partnerships and so forth, patriarchy, if not at an end, would certainly appear to have diminished in importance. However, patriarchy is and always has been more than a family affair. It permeates and interpenetrates every aspect of contemporary life, here and abroad through the passage of time in different class-based societies. The forms that it takes are inflected by the different political and economic conditions of the time. While patriarchy pre-exists capitalism, the claim that a more enlightened sensibility and egalitarian relation between the sexes has emerged under it is, as Mies rightly suggests, plain wrong. If patriarchy is 'invisible' to us, this is because, like the air we breathe, it is all around us and in our lungs. The persistence of aversions amongst men to

feminine adornment beyond the realm of parody serves as one demonstration that patriarchy is alive and well. While evidence suggests that parents, and particularly fathers, dissuade their boys from dressing as girls for fear they will become homosexual (Kane, 2006), the evidence is not an index of attitudes towards sexuality as such but rather what woman represents in patriarchal-capitalism. Clothes do not make the sexuality but they do denote gender and in turn a relation to power. As already suggested, in 'women's' clothes, 'man' shows that male power is symbolic and contingent on appearance. Sexuality does not threaten this symbolic relationship. A 'man' who in her appearance represents a 'woman' does.

Because I wear women's clothes, shoes and makeup for pleasure, the label 'transvestite' would, despite all its negative associations with clinical psychology, seem appropriate. Like the artist potter Grayson Perry, I'm happy to identify with that label if in doing so it helps normalise a common desire amongst men that ought, when practised in public, be of no social consequence. But unlike a transvestite who typically restricts his cross-dressing to the home or lets loose on 'special' nights out, skirts, pantyhose and court shoes are my daywear. My everyday face is a face that radiates colour: red lipstick, different shades of eye shadow and so forth. The sensuousness of the fabrics, the vibrancy of the colours, the bouquet of scents and tactility of the makeup, the pleasure of dressing up and experimenting with a range of styles and colours, are for me life-affirming.

Whereas women are sometimes compelled to dress in feminine styles that require considerable money and effort to carry, and which are often impractical to wear, I have never been under such duress, thus my relationship to these items differs. While maintaining that the pleasure of cross-dressing was my chief motive for wearing women's clothes – it would be disingenuous to claim otherwise – I would not have dressed publicly had it not been aligned to my politics and world-view, a politics made possible because, thanks to those who have struggled before me, I can do so without losing my job. Many men no doubt share a desire to dismantle the gender binary, far fewer to dress as a woman. Without this desire, such a visual statement would appear inauthentic and hollow, or at the very least, difficult to 'pull off' and maintain.

Tolerance discourse, policed at an institutional level, is my shelter and so too, when dressed as a man, is masculinity. The campus and zones in the city where liberal types, too self-conscious to expose their prejudices, mingle are places where I frequently cross-dress. But on evenings in town and at weekends, I often wear drab men's clothing, the coarse textures and muted colours a reminder that my inhibitions, not all to do with self-preservation, are not fully overcome. The repression of my desire to wear women's clothes is not now as pronounced as it was, but wearing them all the time would institute different forms of repression and raise all sorts of practical issues. How, after all, would I counter my rational fear of being attacked? Perhaps by trying to 'pass'? How would I carry off wearing a bikini during the long New Zealand summers that I like to spend on the beach? A camouflage to hide my sex would surely be required, a 'cultural genitalia' as some would say (Kessler and McKenna, 1978). But why should I do this? Why should I define and present myself according to what others understand by sex and gender?

The cross-dresser embodies a contradiction. What am I? Man or woman? Man and woman? Or neither? I hadn't had cause to ask such questions before. I do now. But that confusion lies with society and a need in others to label me. Society has a problem with ambiguities. It has a problem with the ambiguities of gender that my appearance – passing for neither gender – evokes. There's a politics of passing, or rather there's a politics of not passing (e.g., Wilchins, 2006). To be able to pass as a woman without stirring any 'suspicion' that your sex is biologically defined as male is protection. It also plays to rigid categories of what it means to be and look like a woman, or a man. Masculinity was forced on me as a child. I don't now want to be forced to be feminine. I want the freedom to be fluid in my aesthetic, or rather to oscillate between the masculine and feminine styles and therein enact an ongoing separation of appearance (how I dress) and identity (what people regard as my gender). But I'm fortunate. Like the traveller who wanders the cesspools of the developing world and claims by doing so to have a purchase on poverty, I carry a visa, the camouflage of masculinity, to escape back into a comfort zone, a visa that women and transsexuals have not been issued. While dressing as a woman makes you vulnerable in ways you are not when dressed as a man and you develop a more concrete impression of the depths of

misogyny in our society, I have not, like women stamped 'female' at birth and gendered accordingly, had to contend with this, or indeed the pressure to perform femininity for most of my life (I'm sometimes leered at and irrespective of whether people regard me as a man feel vulnerable *as a woman* when alone on city streets). Catherine Marabou (2009: 94) stresses that minimally 'woman' denotes an 'overexposure to dual exploitation' in the home and in the workplace, 'the remainder, burning and plastic, with which we must work'. In this sense, I can no more know what it means to be a woman, than a woman born defined female can know what it means, within society, to be a man or a woman who was born defined male. These labels, and the behaviours prescribed and proscribed by them, deeply affect our psyches. However much I want to be or identify as a woman, no amount of cross-dressing will undo the damage that has already been done, either to me in my socialisation into a masculine gender or to what being socialised to perform masculinity does to others, both men and women. But as suggested, and elaborated on later, I develop a more *affective* sense of what being socially determined a woman entails.

The pleasures of the westernised/European feminine style are as much aesthetic as anything else. We like to dress up. We enjoy silky fabrics, shiny things and vibrant colours. A quirk of history made blue a masculine signifier. For the male, it made cotton socks good; pantyhose bad. This irrationality has become a second nature. By dressing as a woman, I no longer need to pretend to be a man. Because the pleasures of being a woman have largely been denied me until now (also denied to some women), I find it liberating to express my (symbolic) femininity. Forget sports; now, without the need for an alibi, I can talk freely about makeup.

The codes are scrambled. Attitudes change. Behavioural patterns are disrupted. Hidden sensibilities become manifest. It's as if by dressing as a woman I've disclosed a personal secret, that of being a transvestite, and, having done so, earned the trust of both women and men who now feel they can confide in me. Affinities are therein sparked; prejudices stoked. Relationships are reconsidered and recomposed. Some people that once acknowledged me now avert their gaze and avoid mine, sometimes exaggeratedly. They stare blankly ahead of them. All this has happened because now I wear women's clothes. How stupid!



*The Double Take*

I've been open about my cross-dressing proclivities since my early twenties and, on occasion, did experiment in public around that time. However, until now, my experiences were enough to put me off from continually doing so. I first ventured out in makeup when living in a squat on a Peckham estate in South London (not the notorious North Peckham estate now bulldozed). I won't forget the expression of one man on a bus who stormed off after seeing me: hatred in his eyes, face red and bloated with rage. While on the dole for five years, I lived in economically deprived parts of London. The second time I ventured out, this time wearing makeup and leggings, was in East Acton. A gang of youths followed and cornered me in the Underground station where, fortunately, surrounded by commuters, I was able to call friends to rescue me. Later, although they were never really my sort of thing, I would occasionally go to fetish clubs, running a gauntlet shrouded in darkness from home. (Today, the 'gauntlet' I walk between home and university in daylight is a journey that fortunately takes only five minutes: for those first few months I walked hurriedly, looking straight ahead, aware that people were looking. I imagined and still do that, as in the Emperor's New Clothes parable, people are waiting for the opportunity to laugh at me, or worse.)

Spaces are constructed for thinking: the art gallery in which artefacts are presented for contemplation, the lecture theatre in which education aims to antagonise. But these spaces are encircled and bombarded by a market logic that has fashioned artefacts and public institutions as commodities, and their value to society, their *use-value*, is obliterated by relations of exchange, objects and services judged according to whether they generate money for the owner, financier, or rentier. Beyond these increasingly arid oases is a culture craven to the novelties hawked by advertisers, hard to distinguish from what came before. Punters habituated to the world of so-called 'market forces', forces whose energy derives from our loves and our labours, are switched off in the commercial thoroughfares of unthought. The MtF cross-dresser enacts the shock of the new. *She* stands apart in dress and comportment from others. She creates an art gallery oasis in the shopping mall. Without an alibi or shelter of celebrity status, she takes the cross-dresser on the cover of a glossy magazine and puts her on