Blessings in Disguise: Cross-Dressing as Re-Dressing for Female Modernists

Author(s): Susan Gubar

Source: *The Massachusetts Review*, Autumn, 1981, Vol. 22, No. 3 (Autumn, 1981), pp. 477-508

Published by: The Massachusetts Review, Inc.

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/25089168

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at https://about.jstor.org/terms

is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Massachusetts Review*

This content downloaded from 132.187.253.28 on Wed, 27 Nov 2024 13:26:39 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Susan Gubar

Blessings in Disguise:

CROSS-DRESSING AS RE-DRESSING FOR FEMALE MODERNISTS

> The woman shall not wear that which pertaineth unto a man, neither shall a man put on a woman's garment: for all that do so are abomination unto the Lord thy God.—*Deuteronomy 22:5*

> Poor mixed rags
> Forsooth we're made of, like those other dolls
> That lean with pretty faces into fairs.
> It seems as if I had a man in me,
> Despising such a woman.
> —Elizabeth Barrett Browning,
> *Aurora Leigh, VII*

It was while teaching in the Indiana's Women's Prison that I became aware of the truth embedded in so many of Isak Dinesen's stories, specifically her conviction that, while men can and should find in their trials a blessing in disguise, women must make disguise itself a blessing.[1] When I went to the prison for the first time, to teach an English course,[2] I faced an audience ostensibly composed of country and western singers, cover girls, streetwise pimps and lanky cowboys. In spite of their outlandish appearance, as if to confirm the prison as an eerie model of our society's anachronistic system of sex-role socialization, these women had passed through an "Admittance Room" that resembled nothing so much as a Victorian parlor, complete with thin-legged writing desk, mirrors, dainty chairs, and curtained walls. This parlor was consistent with the entire prison structure in which the women were "framed": once they "admitted" belonging in the parlor, the women were photographed, and locked up in prison blocks called "cottages," where they were referred to as "ladies" and written up for such unladylike activities as fighting, cursing or dancing. In this setting how and why had their clothes turned into costumes, and such indecorous costumes as that?

This content downloaded from
132.187.253.28 on Wed, 27 Nov 2024 13:26:39 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Their pallor and their inactivity, as well as their "rehabilitation," which consisted primarily of cosmetology and laundry, seemed all too reminiscent of the claustrophobic lives of women in the 19th century, just as the elaborate costumes they created with the aid of these feminine crafts recalled the strenuous self-presentation that has obsessed women throughout this century. Not really intending to "pass" for the characters they played, the women in the prison seemed to be involved in an elaborate response to confinement, for their costumes were a survival strategy, even a form of escape: unable to alter their imprisonment, these women transformed themselves; the place stayed the same, but they changed, each of them becoming a succession of different people. The inmates of the Women's Prison in Indianapolis can help us understand how and why costuming has a special place in female consciousness and culture. What the arts of the women prisoners suggest is that clothing plays a crucial symbolic role in the response of women to their confinement within patriarchal structures.

Certainly, at the turn of the century, when the uniform of the lady was undergoing rapid alterations, many women artists were as extravagant in their masquerades as the women inmates: Isadora Duncan posing as a Greek Goddess in the Acropolis and Anaïs Nin dressed up as a caged bird in pasties seem as self-consciously fictionalized as stately plump Gertrude Stein or Radclyffe Hall tempting confusion with Dorian Gray.[3] While male modernists like Hemingway, Yeats, and Eliot were doubtlessly also poseurs, women in the 20th century have had a much greater range of options than men with respect to clothes. In this respect, too, they resemble the elaborately garbed women in the Indianapolis Women's Prison who were taking advantage of the only privilege they have which is denied male prisoners—the right to wear what they please. Just as the women inmates escape confinement by appropriating costumes that define freedom for them, female modernists escaped the strictures of societally-defined femininity by appropriating the costumes they identified with freedom. By the turn of the century, moreover, many identified male clothing with just such a costume of freedom.[4]

Cross-dressing in the modernist period is therefore not only a personal or sexual statement on the part of women; it is also a social and political statement that exploits the rhetoric of costuming to redefine the female self. As in the prison, passing is not the point, although many women did dress to pass in the Paris of

This content downloaded from
132.187.253.28 on Wed, 27 Nov 2024 13:26:39 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

the 20's and 30's, as the brilliant photographs of Gyula Brassai illustrate. Among the women artists to be discussed here, however, cross-dressing becomes a way of ad-dressing and re-dressing the inequities of culturally-defined categories of masculinity and femininity. If "man is defined as a human being and woman as a female," as Simone de Beauvoir has argued, "whenever she behaves as a human being she is said to imitate the male." [5]But this means, conversely, that at least one way woman could define herself as human was by determining to imitate man. This is why clothing emerges as a pervasive political issue in the suffrage movement, as well as a persuasive literary image in women's art during the interwar years. Paradoxically the very group who wanted woman to remain feminine might have been responsible for suggesting this strategy to feminists like Alice Stone Blackwell who found themselves constantly reassuring anti-suffragists that "The same fearful prediction, that women would be turned into men, has been made before each successive step of the equal rights movement."[6]

In modernist literature and painting by women, the female cross-dresser figures conspicuously as a heroine of misrule: most simply, this heroine is a woman warrior whose efforts at potency motivate her attempt to prove herself as good as a man; but such presumptuous aspirations can plunge the cross-dresser into a tragic sense of contradiction between her inescapably fallen female flesh and her elegantly and aristocratically masculine attire; sometimes, however, this glamorously Byronic cross-dresser modulates into a being who manages to transcend the dualism of sex-role polarities, calling into question the categories of culture, specifically the category of gender upon which female socialization depends. These three aspects of the cross-dresser —woman warrior, Byronic hero, and androgyne—are what I will trace here. "Inversion"—as the psychologists of the period call it—is most simply an attempt by women to invert the traditional privilege system that lends primacy to men. But inversion goes through a series of displacements, as it is translated into a synonym for per-version and a means of con-version and sub-version.

"What a relief it is to be freed from chignon, extra braids, frizzes, curls, rats, mice, combs, pins, etc., etc."[7] Dr. Mary Walker exclaims in the middle of her chapter on dress in the first of two books she devoted to the political, medical and social situation of American women in the last quarter of the nine-

This content downloaded from
132.187.253.28 on Wed, 27 Nov 2024 13:26:39 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

teenth-century. Dr. Walker is an important starting point for any consideration of female cross-dressing because, living from 1832 to 1919, she supplies some of the links between this century and the last, even as she points us toward the political origin of this literary subject and strategy for women. In the 1850's, Dr. Walker wore the Bloomer outfit which consisted of a loosely fitted tunic (or coat dress) reaching below the knees over pantaloons. Along with such fellow suffragists and personal acquaintances as Lucy Stone, Susan B. Anthony, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Dr. Walker was convinced of the political significance of costuming for women, as her creation of *The Mutual Dress Reform and Equal Rights Association* illustrates.

Like Amelia Bloomer, Mary Walker fought not only for women's right to dress as they please, but also specifically for clothing that would allow freedom of movement, as well as equal distribution of warmth and arrangement so that as little vitality as possible would be expended in carrying it about. In *Hit* (1871) and *Unmasked; or the Science of Immorality* (1878), she argued on hygienic grounds against the dirt of long skirts, the elastics cutting off circulation on the legs, the compression of vital organs by tight-lacing, the fire hazards of large crinolines, the threat to the unborn, and the crippling of feet from small shoes, arguments which had become commonplace in both England and America by this time.[8] But she also reasoned from decency, ridiculing men's notions of modest female dress as the cause of women's vulnerability to sexual attack and abuse. At least one pair of cartoons from *The New York Times* shows Dr. Walker being arrested for an outfit that is far more modest than the hoop-skirt then in vogue [see covers]. Significantly she even claimed to have invented rape-proof underwear that would also discourage (if it could not prevent) seduction.

Harassed by the law and by neighbors, ridiculed by some newspapers for what they euphemistically called her "garmenture of dual form," Dr. Walker was appalled by the weight of unnecessary cloth carried about by the respectable Victorian lady in England and America.[9] She would have agreed with Susan B. Anthony: "I can see no business avocation, in which woman in her present dress *can possibly* earn *equal wages* with men"[10] [emphasis hers]. Dr. Walker believed that fashionable clothing prevented women not only from doing work but from concentrating on it, for women's clothes kept them "unnaturally excited, or in a condition to be easily excited sexually." For this reason,

This content downloaded from
132.187.253.28 on Wed, 27 Nov 2024 13:26:39 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

While bodies are caged in the petticoat badge of dependence and inferiority, minds and souls are subject to evil, psychologizing wills and cannot command themselves; whereas crowns of strength, joy and sufficiency, with choice of place in the excercise of power await the Unbound Woman.[11]

The issue of work, specifically war work, is what first signals the significance of men's clothing for women. Dr. Walker's trousers were obviously suitable for her medical career during the Civil War, a time which her biographer calls "one of the happiest epochs of her kaleidoscopic career. Rebuffs from top brass did not obviate the fact that she was needed almost anywhere she chose to open her medical case."[12] In *Hit,* Dr. Walker's emphasis on the martial arts of women like Joan of Arc, Margaret of Anjou, Boadicea, and Isabella of Spain matches the taste for danger, exertion and patriotism that won her the only Medal of Honor given to a woman. Actually it is not until the approach of World War I, however, that Walker ostentatiously dressed up in male costumes not just for comfort and dignity, but to appropriate and display conventionally male attainments and status. From the 1890's until her death, Mary Walker dressed herself increasingly in masculine evening dress, in a man's coat and pants, stiff collar and tie, with a tall silk top hat and her Medal of Honor in a prominent position [illustration 1]. As elegant as a diplomat's costume or a general's uniform, her outfit had itself clearly be-

[Illust. 1.]

This content downloaded from
132.187.253.28 on Wed, 27 Nov 2024 13:26:39 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

come a badge of honor, symbolic of the proud time when she had been traded, "man for man," for a Confederate soldier.

One fashion historian, Lawrence Langner, has argued that men originally devised divided garments to give themselves mobility and undivided skirts to hamper women in their movements, a gender distinction that simultaneously assured the continuity of the race by announcing and guaranteeing that women would be non-combatants.[13] Certainly, like Deborah Sampson in the Revolutionary War, or Emilie Plater, Polish heroine of the 1831 insurrection, or Philis de la Charce, who protected Provence from invasion by the Duc de Savoie in 1692—all legendary women who dressed as or like men—Dr. Walker was a singular anomoly as a female participant in the Civil War. During World War I, however, a much greater percentage of women worked in the war effort [illustration 2]. The Great War furnished a great opportunity to nurse the men at the front and to "man" the coal mines, ammunitions factories, and farm machines at home.[14] It makes perfect sense that the suffragists in England hailed the war, re-dedicating their energies and renaming *The Suffragette* newspaper *Britannia* in 1915, for the war that destroyed so many men supplied women with work and work clothes, as well as the political freedom which both represented.

As if to explain the mystique of adventure and power that associates male clothing so closely with strength born of combat, Anaïs Nin has the heroine of *Ladders to Fire* (1946) explain that the first time a boy hurt her, she went home and dressed in her brother's suit. This "costume of strength" makes her feel arrogant, for "to be a boy meant one did not suffer." Lillian wishes she could find relief from anguish in action:

> "All through the last war as a child I felt: if only they would let me be Joan of Arc. Joan of Arc wore a suit of armor, she sat on a horse, she fought side by side with men. She must have gained their strength."

But all of Lillian's armor lies broken around her. "The mail had melted, and revealed the bruised feminine flesh."[15] A more fantastic and, therefore, more optimistic version of the woman warrior fascinated the most important woman writing science fiction during the interwar period: C. L. Moore published a series of stories from 1934 to 1939 about Jirel of Joiry, a "warrior lady" who is literally "mailed"—both armored and masculinized. A version of *la fille soldat* of folk songs,[16] Jirel of Joiry reminds us

This content downloaded from
132.187.253.28 on Wed, 27 Nov 2024 13:26:39 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

that, while such a bid for power is not often allowed women in our culture, it has generally been viewed with a considerable degree of tolerance, when not actually glamorized.

Indeed the attractive figures of the woman warrior reveals that, as Robert Stoller, Deborah Feinbloom, and Natalie Davis have pointed out,[17] the asymmetrical status accorded men and women in our culture is provocatively illuminated by the different attitudes we inherit toward cross-dressing in the two sexes. The goddess Athena, wielding the shield and spear of the male warrior, gains esteem by deriving her identity from her father, as does Ovid's Caenis who chooses to become a man (so as to avoid another rape like that inflicted by Poseidon) and who simultaneously receives the gift of invulnerability that leads her/him to become active in martial pursuits.[18] But when Hercules is dressed as a female and placed before the distaff, he is pathetically weakened, emasculated, because he loses the prerogative and power the male genitals and garb symbolize: authority, primacy, independency, and creativity.

The male cross-dresser is labeled a transvestite, ridiculed as a kind of clown (*Charley's Aunt, Some Like It Hot*), condemned for indulging in irrational anarchistic impulses (*Heart of Midlothian,* Bloom in Nighttown), or judged as a psychopath (*Psycho*), unless he is using his disguise as a con for effecting escape (*Huckleberry Finn*) or for seducing women (Sidney's *Arcadia*). While the male is degraded by imitating a woman, characters like Shakespeare's Rosalind (*As You Like It*) have always delighted male authors and audiences alike, although male actors imitating females obviously had their own reasons for enjoying such roles. Especially after the first wave of feminism in Europe, however, such attractive female characters as Meredith's Bella Mount (*The Ordeal of Richard Feverel*), Hardy's Eustacia Vye and Sue Bridehead (*Return of the Native, Jude the Obscure),* Flaubert's *Madame Bovary,* Hemingway's Lady Brett Ashley (*The Sun Also Rises*), and Truffeau's "Tomas" (*Jules et Jim*) testify to male fascination with the female cross-dresser, as do the many fans of Sarah Bernhardt, who played male roles on stage, and Marlene Dietrich, who wore masculine clothing in a number of popular films.[19]

Clearly such seductive cross-dressers can function as sex symbols for men, reflecting masculine attitudes that range from an attempt to eroticize (and thereby possess) the independent woman to only slightly submerged homosexual fantasies. But for

This content downloaded from
132.187.253.28 on Wed, 27 Nov 2024 13:26:39 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

[Illust. 2.]

[Illust. 3.]

women the inversion of cross-dressing is not always or even primarily erotic, as we have already seen. Virginia Woolf's inclusion of photographs of judges, guards, and bishops illustrates in *Three Guineas* (1938) how male uniforms could become first a symbol and then simply a strategy for climbing the hierarchical ladder of sexual stereotyping. From Rosa Bonheur who received authorization from the Paris Police to wear male clothing in 1857 to Dorothy Azner who chose such feminine presences as Lucille Ball and Merle Oberon for her films in the 1930's, all the while herself looking directorial and masculine, women have assumed trousers and ties to facilitate and authenticate their work.[20]

But if cross-dressing implicitly accepts the inevitability of such stratification, it presents special problems because it simultaneously assumes that, as a female, woman is necessarily condemned to inferiority. When, for example, Willa Cather spent her youth dressed in masculine trousers, with her hair cut short, calling herself "Willie," and proudly displaying herself in a Civil War cap [illustration 3], she was presumably just a "tom boy," like the Harding girls in *My Antonia* (1918). For, like her contemporary Dorothy Richardson, Willa Cather's attraction to male clothes seems well articulated by the young women in *The Tunnel* (1919): they are exhilarated by the physical freedom conferred by knickers ("you could knock down a policeman"), especially by the creative strength knickers seem to confer (you feel "like a poet

This content downloaded from
132.187.253.28 on Wed, 27 Nov 2024 13:26:39 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

though you don't know it"). But Richardson's heroines are quite sure that they "wouldn't have a man's—consciousness, for anything."[21] On the other hand, Willa Cather seems far more aware that male dress could alienate her from conventionally female roles and activities. Indeed, this complex realization that she dramatized through her clothing in her youth was profound enough to inform not only the themes but even the structure of her mature fiction, for she repeatedly celebrates maternal characters through the voice of a masculine persona. In *My Antonia,* for example, Cather is both Antonia, the female Muse, and Jim Burden, the male author, both the natural world she celebrates and the cultural world that gives her the language with which to celebrate.

What I am suggesting, then, is that the male narrator is at least metaphorically a kind of mask worn by the female writer to attain the trappings of authority. It was, after all, the male pseudonym in the nineteenth-century that protected the woman artist behind a masculine public identity. George Eliot, who considered inauthentic women's writing "an absurd exaggeration of the masculine style like the swaggering gait of a bad actress in male attire,"[22] was explicitly addressing this dilemma, as were the Bells (the Brontës), George Egerton (Mary Chavelita Dunne), Michael Field (Katherine Bradley and Edith Cooper), and Ralph Iron (Olive Schreiner) implicitly. The woman who associates authorship with authority and masculinity may feel that in becoming a writer she is involved in an attempt to disguise herself as a man, whether or not this is a "vain denial," as Elizabeth Barrett Browning claimed of George Sand's name.[23] Elaine Showalter has recently shown that male characters in 19th-century women's novels represent extensions of the female self that had to be disowned as improper or unfeminine.[24] With more personal freedom in their lives, female modernists tended to be fairly extreme both in actually playing the male role and in their reaction against such camouflaging.

When Muriel Rukeyser revised an earlier poem in which she had portrayed herself as a male god, she condemned her earlier evasion: "No more masks! No more mythologies!"[25] What her poem seems to imply is that even male mimicry that presents itself as an act of assertion can, paradoxically, partake of "feminine" self-denial, even self-hatred, for the male facade or persona may be an attempt born of shame to deny, hide, or disgrace the female self. This objection was strenuous enough to yield the title for a

This content downloaded from
132.187.253.28 on Wed, 27 Nov 2024 13:26:39 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

popular anthology of recent women's poetry. But just as influential a group of modernists accepted the necessity for male masks on female faces, although such disguises might irreparably filter the timbre and tone of women's voices.

When we turn to the women painters of the modernist period, we find two of the most important—Frida Kahlo and Romaine Brooks—portraying the pain the male costume produces on and in the female figure. In their different ways, both reveal how—as an erotic strategy—cross-dressing can free the woman from being a sex object for men, even as it expresses the mutilation inextricably related to inversion when it is experienced as perversion. For these two artists, the cross-dresser is no longer a woman warrior. Instead she is a self-divided, brooding, Byronic figure who dominates the center of their canvases, hinting at power diminished or fallen. As a Satanic outsider, moreover, this cross-dresser flaunts her perversity so she seems wounded, yet defiant, and glamorous too.

Possibly the most dramatic portrait of the cross-dresser is Kahlo's 1940 "Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair" [illustration 4]. Against a blood-red background, Kahlo presents herself in a dark suit that is several sizes too big for her, as if she feels unable to fill a man's place. Her delicate hands and feminine heeled shoes look vulnerable and inadequate in this costume. She holds, near her genitals, the scissors that have apparently just been used to cut off her hair, as if to suggest that she also destroyed herself as a woman. Cropped and seated, she looks like a punished waif. The wisps and tangles of black hair that litter the area around her chair are further evidence that some sort of self-castration has occurred, while they suggest that she is still caught in a maze of pain. Flowing over the chair like tears, these locks also float in mid-space like extra-terrestrial seaweed, the only object existing in her world, but clearly insufficient to tie her to it. The far-flung hairs, no less than the cropped head, make her seem forlorn, as if shorn for sacrifice, not unlike a prisoner of war: she is Rapunzel, forever locked in the tower room now, or a tamed and vanquished Medusa.

Above the seated woman, at the top of the canvas, the words of a popular song appear: "Mira que si te quise, fue pro el pelo,/Ahora que estás pelona, ya no te quiero" (Look, if I loved you, it was for your hair. Now that you are bald, I don't love you any more"). Most simply, the song reflects the biographical background for this self-mutilation, Kahlo's discovery that her

This content downloaded from
132.187.253.28 on Wed, 27 Nov 2024 13:26:39 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

[Illust. 4.]

husband—Diego Rivera—was having an affair with her best friend.[26] As the writing on the wall which frames her, the song explains her fear that she labored under an illusion when she thought she was loved. As in many of her other paintings, Kahlo's voicelessness (as opposed to her husband's "sentence"), her solitariness, the sterility of the background, and her physical fragility are left to imply how vulnerable and lonely she feels. Again as in her other paintings, however, there is a strong attempt here to exorcise pain through irony.[27] After all, the seated woman has herself produced the man's rejection. Sitting immobile and staring calmly out of the canvas, as if in patient defiance, she says that she does not want the kind of love he is capable of giving. At least the rape of her locks, she seems to imply, will be of her own doing. Refusing to be the object of his admiration, she holds the scissors outward, still open, as if aware of the implied vengeance she could exact against this man who thinks he can walk away from her unscathed.

The figure in Kahlo's painting seems newborn and dangerous, because she knows her own origins. Romaine Brooks' self-

This content downloaded from
132.187.253.28 on Wed, 27 Nov 2024 13:26:39 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

portrait is more mysterious about the source of anguish [illustration 5]. Yet, while Kahlo's figure denies her female sexuality by dressing as man, Brooks' affirms her ambiguous eroticism through her male clothes. If any single image could call into question the current psychoanalytic argument that there is no such thing as a female transvestite, presumably because women are not genitally excited by their use of clothing, it is Romaine Brooks' self-portrait. Composed in 1923, primarily in her typically dark palette, Brooks' self-portrait displays her wearing a black top hat, black jacket and gray gloves, with an open-necked white shirt. Only the title and a faint redness on the lips give away the gender of this far more androgynous subject, who stands in front of a wasteland composed of crumbling, charred buildings that Brooks' biographer, Meryle Secrest, sees as "the aftermath of a holocaust."[28] The painter's right arm, which is held tightly against her body, and her clenched fist give the impression that she must keep herself together by an act of will. Her shaded eyes have a piercing look,as if she is struggling not to look away from what horrifies her. While, unlike Kahlo's seated figure, she stands up for herself, we sense that she too is caught in the tension between costume and body that reflects some inner self-division. Looking Byronic in her remote melancholy and in her revolt against social conventions, she has turned her back to the world. She is an outsider, marked by her shaded brow like Byron's Cain.

[Illust. 5.]

This content downloaded from
132.187.253.28 on Wed, 27 Nov 2024 13:26:39 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Brooks also resembles Byron's wandering outcast in her seductive glamour. Wan and world-weary, she is exotic and erotic, dashing in her vaguely aristocratic evening clothes. Power and ambiguous sexuality also characterize the other cross-dressers Romaine Brooks painted, from the boyish "Peter" (1923-4) to "Renata Borgatti" (1919) who sits tensely at the piano, a bent black figure almost like a hawk, shrouded by her cape and as bloodless as all of Brooks' other creations or "Una, Lady Troubridge" (1924) whose elegant evening clothes and monocle seems as well-bred, if as faintly ludicrous, as the dachshunds who pose with her [see p. 508]. Bertha Harris has explained that the international lesbians living in Paris in the 1920's divided the world into two classes: "to be upper class was at its finest to be also gay."[29] Certainly, the aristocratic clothing of Brooks' subjects is a sign of their homosexuality. But, for Brooks, homosexuality seems inextricably related to the self-absorption that accompanies the revolt against conventionality: even the most powerful of these figures look lonely, as do the "incomplete beings" of Romaine Brooks' drawings.

Meryle Secrest relates Brooks' obsession with incomplete being to the sense of self created in Brooks when she was dressed in her favored brother's old clothes by a mother who went so far, if we can trust Brooks' unpublished memoirs, as to abandon her. Although Brooks did not especially appreciate the fictional characterization of herself in Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* (1928), Brooks and Hall share this obsession with incomplete being. For both of them, the invert is "grotesque and splendid, like some primitive thing conceived in a turbulent age of transition,"[30] a martyr who is hideously maimed but also a romantic outlaw and rebel. When Hall's heroine in *The Well of Loneliness,* Stephen Gordon, realizes she is "flawed in the making," the product of a cruel God, her Bible falls open to "the Lord set a mark upon Cain . . ." (p. 232). Feeling at one and the same time victimized by biological fate and by parents who wanted male children, both Romaine Brooks and Radclyffe Hall identified cross-dressing with lesbianism and lesbianism with physiologically and psychologically masculine traits in women that set them apart as marked.

Known to her friends as John, wearing elegant men's jackets and ties, Radclyffe Hall wrote about the frustration of a girl born to a father who treats his daughter as the son he wanted. Since this is only a slight exaggeration of the psychology of what

This content downloaded from
132.187.253.28 on Wed, 27 Nov 2024 13:26:39 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

growing up female can be in patriarchy, it is hardly surprising to find that Hall's analysis of her sense of freakishness repeats itself in the biographies of women whom she would have considered far more normal than herself: Dorothy Richardson, for example, who was called "son" by her father, or Carson McCullers, an inveterate cross-dresser, who considered herself an "invert" because she had been "born a man."[31] Furthermore, like both Richardson and McCullers, Hall's heroine is plagued by doubts over her ability to perform adequately either sexually or artistically: except for a happy interlude—significantly during World War I when she heroically works in The London Ambulance Column—Stephen Gordon feels unable to compete successfully with men for the love of women; "I shall never be a great writer," she further tells herself, "because of my maimed and insufferable body" (p. 246). What Hall implies in *The Well of Loneliness* is that the woman who feels the need to turn herself into a man is haunted by the feeling that, if judged as a man, she is inadequate. If the woman warrior recalls Ovid's story of Caenus, who gained invulnerability to penetration when she was turned into a man, then the Byronic cross-dresser recalls Ovid's Iphis: saved from infanticide by her mother who disguised her in boy's clothes, Iphis longed to wed her intended bride; but she feared "love could never be enjoyed," unless she could be physically changed into a man as well (*Metamorphoses,* X, 229-33).

Radclyffe Hall suffered from bleeding wounds in her hands during the writing of her next book,[32] a symptom that aptly displays her anxiety about writing and her sense of herself as an unjustly persecuted martyr. Certainly, at its most didactic, *The Well of Loneliness* protests against the societally-induced "stigmata of the abnormal—verily the wounds of One nailed to a cross" (p. 280). By fighting prejudice against what she called the "congenital invert," Hall presented her novel as a fictional equivalent of the theories of Havelock Ellis, who was writing the fourth volume of his *Psychology of Sex* (1929) as a plea for understanding how and why women can love one another, a "phenomenon" he traces throughout many different cultures, with special attention to cross-dressers who tried and succeeded in actually passing as men. Not only did Ellis supply the introductory "Commentary" for *The Well of Loneliness*; he advised and helped Hall throughout the legal defense set up after the book was banned in England. Yet he, no less than Hall herself, was confounding lesbianism with what today is called

This content downloaded from
132.187.253.28 on Wed, 27 Nov 2024 13:26:39 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

transsexuality. And he, no less than she, implies that the woman born a "congenital invert"—the term alone sounds like an illness—was the helpless victim of a biological tragedy, for "in the inverted woman the masculine traits are part of an organic instinct which she by no means always wishes to accentuate."[33]

Whether or not Ellis actually drove his own wife to "inversion"—that is, to taking female lovers—out of his far less widely published impotence, as one of his biographers suggests,[34] his theory expresses the same sense of biological determinism and freakishness that helped produce the hermaphrodite in Natalie Barney's *The One Who Is Legion* (1930), a "seraphita-seraphitus" figure modelled on Balzac's androgynous hero(ine) *Seraphita* (1835). This same sense of aberration created the atmosphere in which Barney's friend, the poet and cross-dresser Renée Vivien, arranged her anorexic suicide to the dismay of yet another cross-dresser, Colette.[35] It makes sense that Virginia Woolf protested the banning of *The Well of Loneliness,* but even the title might have disturbed her with its equation of female anatomy with tragic destiny. About to write her most feminist criticism, perhaps she would have also been sensitive to the ways in which Hall's and Ellis's notion of inversion actually enforced the sexual stereotypes Woolf sought to evade at least in her most fanciful work, *Orlando* (1928), which was published a few days after the trial and dedicated to her friend, the cross-dresser Vita Sackville-West.[36]

While Orlando's liberation from gender depends on biological, literary and historical transformation bestowed like a gift by the gracious novelist, there is a modernist whose less fanciful analysis of cross-dressing allows us to re-interpret Kahlo dressed in an oversized suit and Brooks' dandies in their inappropriate elegance as clowns. Of course, the elegant masquerades and lavish parties attended by Natalie Barney's guests, including Dolly Wilde who dressed up as her uncle Oscar, indicate how playfully self-conscious lesbian culture continued to be in its perpetuation of the mystique of gaiety throughout the interwar years, regardless of the tragic contradictions explored in some of the art. Isak Dinesen, who actually posed in a Pierrot costume on a number of occasions, suggests in her short fiction that, for all her pain, the invert is in a good situation to di-vert society, for she objectifies the dilemma of all people. In the first of her *Seven Gothic Tales* (1934), "The Deluge of Norderney," one of Dinesen's eccentric spinsters narrates what she presents as a paradig-

This content downloaded from
132.187.253.28 on Wed, 27 Nov 2024 13:26:39 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

matic story of growing up female. Her heroine, Calypso, is brought up by Count Seraphina, a man "convinced that no woman was ever allowed to enter heaven" (p. 43). A follower of the strand of Christianity that has surfaced in such texts as the apocryphal *Gospel of Thomas*—"For every female who makes herself male will enter the Kingdom of Heaven"—and in such figures as Pope Joan and Saint Pellagia,[37] Count Seraphina recalls again Balzac's *Seraphita.* He also illustrates the link between male homosexuality, theories of androgyny, and misogyny when he dresses his niece up in boy's clothes so as to transform "that drop of blood of the devil himself, a girl, into that sweet object nearest the angels, which was a boy" (p. 43).

This solution becomes inadequate when the girl reaches puberty and consequently becomes invisible to the misogynist men's club of this castle. Resolving to cut off her long hair and to chop off her breasts, Calypso harks back to the mythic Amazons who sliced off their breasts to achieve manly prowess and forward to a character created by Dinesen's most important successor, Carson McCullers. As if acting out Emily Dickinson's call—"Amputate my freckled Bosom!/Make me bearded like a man!"—in *Reflections of a Golden Eye* (1941) a rejected woman cuts off the nipples of her breasts with garden shears.[38] Dinesen, however, saves her heroine by supplying Calypso with the unused room of her great-grandmother where she happens on a mirror and an enormous old painting representing three naked nymphs admired for their beauty by the on-gazing satyrs and centaurs. Convinced, by way of comparison with the mirror, of her own physical loveliness, she is paradoxically saved from self-mutilation by yet another image of the effect of the female body on man.

For Dinesen, women's obsession with how they look to men is indistinguishable not only from the fall from paradise, but from the prior fall into gender. Man is born with a memory of the time when he was alone in Eden:

> "But poor Eve found him there, with all his claims upon her, the moment she looked into the world. That is the grudge that woman has always had against the Creator: she feels that she is entitled to have that epoch of paradise back for herself" (p. 38).

Having been socialized into asking not "What can I see?" but "How do I look?" (p. 45), women are more deeply enmeshed in costuming and role-playing. Having fallen so much below men from the paradisal nakedness of Eden, women nevertheless

This content downloaded from
132.187.253.28 on Wed, 27 Nov 2024 13:26:39 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

gain privileged insight into the duplicities of identity, for the novelist whom Carson McCullers could introduce as Isak Dinesen, the Baroness, Karen Blixen-Fineke, or Tanya[39] authored fictional worlds in which characters even at the very brink of death realize that only "By thy mask I shall know thee" (p. 26). While the women of the nineteenth-century, "living in those tight corsets within which they could just manage to breathe," were a "work of art" (p. 94), Dinesen implies that women of the twentieth-century have liberated themselves not by evading such objectification but by learning how to manipulate costumes so as to become a succession of works of art. Talking of her former self, the artist in "The Dreamers" explains, "Never again will I have my heart and my whole life bound up with one woman, to suffer so much" (p. 345). Dinesen's most highly respected heroines change their identities as easily as they change their clothes. With a number of selves at their disposal, multiple lives to live, such women indulge in the playfulness of impersonation with what seems like Denesen's complete approval, if only because, within her gothic framework, all faces are finally masks for the skull, all bodies costumes of the skeleton.

Not a few of Dinesen's characters dream of creating "a being of its own kind, an object of art which was neither boy nor girl" (p. 43). What they seek is the wisdom of both sexes which led Dinesen to claim that "Moses in trousers could never have brought forth water from a rock." The last two artists I will consider—Gertrude Stein and Djuna Barnes—focus on cross-dressing as just such a dream of prophecy and power. Actually, Gertrude Stein managed to create herself as a "being of its own kind," neither masculine nor feminine. Her inversion is a radical form of con-version, for she seems to transcend not only the limits of gender, but also the confines of humanness. The sculptures of Jacques Lipchitz (1920) and Jo Davidson (1920), as well as the famous photograph by Carl Van Vechten (1934), display Stein looking like a cross between Buddha and the emperor Julius Caesar. Possibly the most expressive illustration of Stein's dramatization of herself as a "being of its own kind," however, is Cecil Beaton's photograph taken at Bilignin [illustration 6]. Flanked by the seated Alice B. Toklas on her right hand and by the seated Bernard Faÿ on her left, Stein stands serenely in front of what looks like a pagoda or miniature chapel, at the place where the mowed pathways cross, in robes that make her look ministerial as she mediates horizontally between the

This content downloaded from
132.187.253.28 on Wed, 27 Nov 2024 13:26:39 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

[Illust. 6.]

male and the female, and vertically from the earth upward to the top of the spire and to the sky above.

Earlier in Stein's career, she had exploited the male cover, most covertly in her disguising of herself as Jeff Campbell in "Melanctha" (1909), so as to portray a homosexual relationship in acceptably heterosexual terms. But, in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933), Stein had overtly adopted feminine Alice's voice in order to portray herself as a "great man." Indeed, Gertrude-masked-as-Alice had first considered writing a book to be entitled "The wives of geniuses I have sat with." It is, of course, because she, Stein, was the genius-husband that she would explain to feminist friends that she did not "mind the cause of

This content downloaded from
132.187.253.28 on Wed, 27 Nov 2024 13:26:39 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

women or any other cause but it does not happen to be her business."[40] What *was* her business was fashioning an image of herself through her art: "When this you see remember me," all of her writing insists by virtue of its very eccentricity. But this line, taken from *Four Saints in Three Acts* (1928), implies that the artist is herself a kind of saint testifying to the authority of her experience by speaking in what sounded to many like "tongues." If Stein sometimes used masculine clothing as a clown suit [illustration 7], she always implied that the fool was divine. "Saints talk for me," Stein explained in an earlier piece, "Saints talk to me/Saints talk with me. Saints talk with saints."[41]

Claiming the right of self-creation with great wit and relish, Stein evaded the gender categories that obsessed so many of her contemporaries. But contempt for the secular classifications of culture also led Stein to create radically innovative art. We can see this as early as *Tender Buttons* (1914), a series of idiosyncratic definitions organized around three subjects: Objects, Food, and Rooms. In fact, as the title illustrates, *Tender Buttons* is (are?) also concerned with clothing, classification, sex, and language: are tender buttons tasty buttons? buttons meant to be tendered? sore buttons? belly buttons? clitoral buttons? Whatever they are, they point to Stein's obsession with the way in which clothing constitutes a sign system that can open or close off meaning.

Consider how many of the objects in the first section are clothes, specifically women's clothes: "Mildred's Umbrella," "A Method of a Cloak," "A Long Dress," "A Red Hat," "A Blue Coat," "A Purse," "A Petticoat," "A Waist," "A Handkerchief," "Colored Hats," "A Feather," "Shoes," "A Shawl," and the concluding "This is This Dress, Aider." Most of these common female appurtenances are as mysterious as a "A Cloth": "Enough cloth is plenty and more, more is almost enough for that and besides if there is no more spreading is there plenty of room for it. Any occasion shows the best way" (p. 469). The rhetoric of clothing is reduced to non-sense here. But "any occasion shows the best way" also has the ring of some (admittedly mad) fashion magazine blurb. The subsequent sections on Food and Rooms strengthen the possibility that *Tender Buttons* is a daemonic Mrs. Beeton's, a subversive conduct book that copes with traditionally female preoccupations—glamour tips, recipes, interior decorating—in a sybilline manner that ridicules social conventions, even as it defies conventional interpretation. Furnishing her readers

This content downloaded from
132.187.253.28 on Wed, 27 Nov 2024 13:26:39 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

with a radically arbitrary set of new meanings for old words, Stein reminds us of the arbitrariness of conventional sign systems.

Published at the very beginning of World War I, *Tender Buttons* sets out to demolish the conventions of 19th

[Illust. 7.]

century literary realism as systematically as the first World War, in Stein's opinion, "tried to end the nineteenth century."[42] And just as she could characterize the 1914-1918 war as "a nice war," *Tender Buttons* is "nice" in its exuberant certitude that the mimetic, representational function of lan-

This content downloaded from
132.187.253.28 on Wed, 27 Nov 2024 13:26:39 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

guage and literature could be annihilated. As she explained in her parodic rhetoric *How to Write* (1931), a sentence "Pleases by its sense. This is a fashion in sentences."[43] But, if sense is merely fashion, it is also true that "A sentence is from this time I will make up my mind" (p. 31). Therefore, Stein can be her own and only model, trying on "dress address name" (p. 115) with studied abandon. Supplied with such a resplendently eccentric wardrobe of words, "Think of how everybody follows me" (p. 34). What Stein preaches, then, through exemplification, is that "Grammar is in our power" (p. 73). As a number of critics have suggested, her non-sense functions as a kind of incantation that works to alter consciousness itself.[44] Certainly the operatic sound of this language of her own, so brilliantly perceived by Virgil Thompson, seems to liberate her words from the rigidities of sense. Sometimes what we seem to get in a Stein essay or play are liturgical invocations of the self in praise of what it is in the act of creating, hymns by and about Saint Gertrude, Stein-songs.

If Stein converts the image of the cross-dresser into a kind of icon of herself as a divinity, Djuna Barnes provides what might be called the anatomy of transvestism in *Nightwood* (1936), a novel that focuses on the way in which salvation is possible only through the sub-version preached and practiced by the invert. From baptismal basins described as "loosing their skirts of water in a ragged and flowing hem," to rationalism which "dresses the unknowable in the garment of the known,"[45] *Nightwood* is a clothing-obsessed book in which we find Dr. O'Connor, who lies in bed wearing a golden semicircle of a wig with long pendent curls, a man heavily painted with rouge and mascara, and Robin Vote, a girl who habitually dresses as a boy. "What is this love we have for the invert, boy or girl?" (p. 136), the male transvestite asks about the passion the female cross-dresser creates in all who meet her.

Robin Vote is "a tall girl with the body of a boy" (p. 46) whose men's trousers and shoes represent at least initially the physical freedom from feminine constraints that allows her to wander through the streets at night like a libertine, a female Don Juan who enthralls all the women she meets. Robin rejects the dress because it is a symbol in *Nightwood* of feminine vulnerability, specifically women's physical liability of being owned or entered, for the dress—as Mary Walker had warned—allows women to be as easily violated as the "Tup-

This content downloaded from
132.187.253.28 on Wed, 27 Nov 2024 13:26:39 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

peny Uprights," prostitutes on London Bridge who for tuppence wait

> "holding their badgered flounches, or standing still, letting you do it, silent and as indifferent as the dead, as if they were thinking of better days, or waiting for something they had been promised when they were little girls; their poor damned dresses hiked up and falling away over the rumps, all gathers and braids, like a Crusader's mount, with all the trappings gone sideways with misery" (p. 130-1).

These "old whore petticoats,"[46] as Sylvia Plath would call them, represent the feminization of women that Robin Vote rejects, much as she rejects motherhood, wifedom, and domesticity.

One of a kind, born and baptized in male garb, Robin is also the invert as pervert, for she is described as sickly, solitary, half-child, half-criminal. Awakened "in a jungle trapped in a drawing room" (p. 35), Robin is "a beast turning human" (p. 37). Her somnambulism, her inability to remember or fully awaken herself, the fact that she is lost, with no history and no legitimate place in society, all of these factors make her seem an emblem of woman as she has been defined by patriarchy. Sub-human, she aspires to the status of human being at least in part by dressing as a man. But she is doomed to fall to the level of the beasts. She is, after all, Robin(g) Vote: just as her first name illustrates her exclusion from culture, her last name is at least partially an ironic comment on the limited potential of the suffrage movement for altering women's fate.

Both Robin and Dr. O'Connor are misfits, neither masculine nor feminine, belonging nowhere. Like the Jew who longs to be assimilated, ironically-named Felix, the transvestite is "alone, apart and single" (p. 10), the object of derision and a marked scapegoat, as well as the appropriate symbol of a sick, sham society where everyone feels, as Dr. O'Connor does, as if he "turned up this time as I shouldn't have been" (p. 91). But the transvestites of *Nightwood* are also part of a much larger group of characters, all of whom turn themselves into works of art: the paralyzed man on display in a box at Coney Island, the "living statues," tattooed Nikka, Mademoiselle Basquette who looks like a ship's figurehead, and stitched-together Frau Mann are all living dolls. In Barnes' world of perpetual circuses and masquerades, the transvestite is not trying

This content downloaded from
132.187.253.28 on Wed, 27 Nov 2024 13:26:39 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

to become or pass for a member of the opposite sex. Instead, like the minstrel, the dandy, the freak or the clown, the cross-dresser tends to look like an imitation or artifact—not like a man, but like a mannikin. As Dr. O'Connor explains, "The last doll, given to age, is the girl who would have been a boy, or the boy who should have been a girl" (p. 148).

Used and abused, denied interiority, the perfection of the living doll nevertheless calls attention to the flawed human being: this is all a man or woman is, s/he implies, old clothes on a stick. Part of Robin's allure for her lover, Nora, is that, by turning herself into an object, she transcends the world of becoming as effectively as the saint. Perhaps this is one reason why Barnes fictionalizes Natalie Barney as Saint Musset in the *Ladies Almanack* (1928). In *Nightwood,* where childbirth only results in death, the invert's sterility is as precious as the saint's chastity, for both evade the horror of generativity and successiveness. Taking all punishment, resembling without containing life, the transvestite-doll becomes a fetish with magical powers. A remnant of childhood play-acting, the transvestite-doll sustains our trace memories of an androgynous (pregenital?) time when we evaded the trap of gender, or so Dr. O'Connor claims, when he identifies the invert with the romantic character of our childhood dreams:

> "The girl lost, what is she but the Prince found? The Prince on the white horse that we have always been seeking. And the pretty lad who is a girl, what but the prince-princess in point lace—neither one and half the other, the painting on the fan! We love them for that reason. We are impaled in our childhood upon them as they rode through our primers, the sweetest lie of all, now come to be in boy or girl, for in the girl it is the prince, and in the boy it is the girl that makes a prince a prince—and not a man" (p. 136-7).

Yet, by trying to recapture "the living lie of our century" (p. 137), the transvestite only reminds us how far removed we are from the fairy tales of our childhood. Because of this and in direct opposition to the prevailing sanctions of our culture, Barnes actually celebrates the male transvestite in his attempt to tap psychic forces denied or perverted by society. An apostle of darkness, Dr. O'Connor wears a nightgown, the "natural raiment of extremity," one character explains, because "What nation, what religion, what ghost, what dream, has not worn it—infants, angels, priests, the dead; why should not the doctor, in the grave dilemma of his alchemy, wear his dress?" (p. 80). As a man who would be a prophet, Dr. O'Connor identifies himself with femi-

This content downloaded from
132.187.253.28 on Wed, 27 Nov 2024 13:26:39 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

nine insight and the intuition of the hermaphroditic Tiresias or Dionysus who was also known as "The Physician." A gynecologist, Dr. O'Connor resembles the midwives and shamans of primitive cultures who have traditionally used women's garb, women's medicinal crafts, and even self-castration as a sign of their dedication to female powers.[47] Significantly, Dr. O'Connor calls God "She," because of the "way she made me" (p. 150). Furthermore, there *is* a female god in *Nightwood*: all of the characters are de-voted to Robin Vote who is the votary infusing and epitomizing their lives; her "flesh . . . will become myth" (p. 37).

Probably the most memorable scene in *Nightwood* is the last vision we have of Robin going down on all fours to play with her lover's dog or to mate with it, a scene curiously ritualized by its being performed in front of an altar of candles and Madonnas, in side the ruined Chapel of Nora's estate. Robin, who represents the night denied by day-time consciousness, is enacting and sanctifying the myth of herself as an invert who recaptures the physical, the bestial, that has been debased by culture. Not only has she rejected a culture shown to be utterly bankrupt; she has herself become Our Lady of the Beasts, for the word "dog" is the word "god" inverted. Robin bows down in a rite of inversion which consecrates the female, not the male, deity. While male modernists like Joyce and Eliot were also fascinated by the heretical power of the woman, they wrote in dread of it. Actually, the crouching, barking woman at the end of Barnes' novel is the "D-o-g" feared as degrading in Circe's whorehouse where Joyce's Bloom-Ulysses is made sensual and effeminate, as well as the Dog Eliot's Tiresias would rather not have exhume the dead corpse in *The Wasteland* (1922), where the Chapel Perilous remains empty. Unlike the grotesque transvestities in modernist literature by men, both of the inverts of *Nightwood* are closely identified with heroic attempts to get back to prehistory. And, interestingly, Berenice Abbott's photographic portrait of Djuna Barnes—reproduced at the front of Louis Kannenstine's *The Art of Djuna Barnes*—presents the artist seated (apparently quite self-consciously) in front of a large clock.

An alternative to historical time, the cross-dressers of *Nightwood* are therefore closely associated with the effort to regain the chaotic, primal forces repressed by the categories of culture. For this reason, both are identified not only with fantasies of childhood, but specifically with the wolf who dresses up as the grandmother in "Little Red Riding Hood,"[48] in part because

This content downloaded from
132.187.253.28 on Wed, 27 Nov 2024 13:26:39 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

the wolf is a kind of dog, as Eliot implied in his revision of Webster. Barnes probably would not disagree with Bruno Bettleheim's interpretation of this tale's representation of "the daughter's unconscious wish to be seduced by her father (the wolf)"; nor would she disagree with Erich Fromm's reading of the punishment of the wolf as a "triumph by man-hating women."[49] But what she stresses is the desire of the wolf to be the grandmother, the desire of the girl to make love to her grandmother, and the intimation that the grandmother's love for the little girl is really wolfish in its origin, for she would eat (kill) the girl and eat (savour or love) the girl who is her younger self. By embodying our irrational, secret desires, the cross-dresser for Barnes reflects the savage wildness that can only be hidden, never obliterated, in the forest of the night-wood that is sexuality.

Cross-dressing is, of course, still with us as a symbol in female culture, in spite of the unisex fashions ushered in by the second wave of feminism: in *The Woman Warrior,* for example, Maxine Hong Kingston imagines herself as a swordswoman who actually manages to defend and avenge her people, even as she uses her armor to conceal her pregnancy and protect her baby; Byronic exhilaration in perversity is what lends allure to Patti Smith, the rock 'n roll performer who parodies Mick Jagger, and to the heroines of Jean Stubbs (in "Cousin Lewis") and Ruth Wolff (in *The Abdication*); finally, Iris Murdoch enstates Honor Klein as the androgynous deity of *A Severed Head,* because this philosopher queen wields the Samarai sword as a spiritual exercise and because she has gained savage, forbidden knowledge from commerce with her brother.[50] But all these contemporary artists are elaborating on an image that dominated the imagination of women living between the wars. As a metaphor that flourished when the success of the suffragists paradoxically and tragically marked the temporary destruction of the women's movement, cross-dressing was closely related to lesbianism and expatriation in the art of female modernists. On the one hand a sign of self-division, even self-contempt, on the other an effort at expressing love for other women (and, by extension, for the female self), cross-dressing reflected their anxious sense of transition and uncertainty, even as it demonstrated their remarkably self-conscious experimentation with sexual role-playing.

One final example, a dream recorded by H.D. during her analysis with Freud in 1933, seems to sum up this uncertainty. She sees herself first dressed in a rose-colored ball-gown and

This content downloaded from
132.187.253.28 on Wed, 27 Nov 2024 13:26:39 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

then in male evening dress: "I am not quite comfortable, not quite myself, my trouser-band does not fit very well," she admits; "I realize that I had on, underneath the trousers, my ordinary underclothes, or rather I was wearing the long party-slip that apparently belonged to the ball gown." For H.D. this dream ends on a note of "frustration and bewilderment."[51] But for us this very frustration and bewilderment can be seen as a vital source of women's art, resulting as it does from women's consciousness of their dependence on male-created signs even for the most intimate forms of self-expression. Propelled to discover what would be truly fitting and suitable, as her dance-partner in the dream—Ezra Pound—never had to do, H.D. went on in the next decades to write her great female epics. Her final memoir of Ezra Pound, *End to Torment* (1979), imagines a resolution to their tormented relationship in the appearance of a being, he-her, Seraphitus-Seraphita, who is both their representative and their Divine Child. H.D.'s personal and poetic progress serves to remind us that the women who helped form what we too often consider the exclusively male movement of modernism exploited transvestism only initially to in-vest the traditional forms of patriarchy with authority, for ultimately such artists di-vest conventional forms of legitimacy and, finally, as the etymology of the word transvestite implies, they do this to make a travesty of sexual signs.

NOTES

A draft of this paper was presented at a conference on Women and Culture at the University of California at Davis on April 20, 1978 as a companion piece to Sandra M. Gilbert's essay on transvestism as a metaphor in male modernist literature, forthcoming in *Critical Inquiry*. I am indebted to the insights of Sandra Gilbert throughout, although any inadequacies in the formulation here are my own.

[1] Isak Dinesen, "The Deluge at Norderney," *Seven Gothic Tales* (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), p. 24. Subsequent quotations appear parenthetically in the text.

[2] Anne Hedin and I taught a Women and Literature course for Indiana University's Department of English at the Women's Prison in Indianapolis in the Fall term, 1977. I am grateful for her generous help in formulating a number of the ideas examined here.

[3] See Isadora Duncan, *My Life* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1927), and Robert Snyder, *Anais Nin Observed* (Chicago: Swallow, 1976), p. 74.

[4] For discussions of the appearance of trousers for sports, see Phillis Cunnington and Allan Mansfield, *English Costume for Sports and Outdoor Recreation: From the 16th to the 19th Centuries* (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1969), pp. 225-45. For a discussion of the boyish fashions of the second

This content downloaded from
132.187.253.28 on Wed, 27 Nov 2024 13:26:39 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

decade of this century, see C. Willett and Phillis Cunnington, *A Picture History of English Costume* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1960), p. 140.

[5] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex,* trans. by H. M. Parshley (New York: Bantam, 1961), p. 47.

[6] Alice Stone Blackwell, "Making Women into Men, 1893," is reprinted in *The American Sisterhood,* ed. Wendy Martin (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), pp. 108-109.

[7] Mary E. Walker, M.D., *Hit* (New York: The American News Company, 1871), p. 69. Jonathan Katz focuses on the relationships between passing women, female transvestism, and dress reform in *Gay American History* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1976), p. 243.

[8] *Ibid.,* pp. 66-9. See also Helene E. Roberts, "The Exquisite Slave: The Role of Clothes in the Making of the Victorian Woman" and "Dress Reform as Antifeminism: A Response to Helene E. Robert's 'The Exquisite Slave: The Role of Clothes in the Making of the Victorian Woman'" in *Signs* (Spring 1977), 554-79. While one argues that dress reform was a feminist issue, and the other that it was part of anti-suffrage sentiment, both verify the importance of the debate before Walker's formulation of it.

[9] Quoted in "Pantsuited Pioneer of Women's Lib, Dr. Mary Walker," by Allison Lockwood in *Smithsonian,* Vol. VII, no. 12 (March 1977), 113-19. By 1856 a silk dress required 18 to 20 yards of material," writes C. Willett Cunnington, *Feminine Attitudes in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Haskell House Pub., 1973), p. 163; "when flounces were in style, as they were in the fifties and later, as many as 150 yards of trim" were worn, according to Cynthia Kinnard in "The Women's Movement as Expressed through Dress," Slide Lecture at the Midwest Symposium on the Preservation of Historic Textiles and Costumes, May 17, 1978. I am indebted to the insights of Cynthia Kinnard on the relationship of dress reform to the American suffrage movement.

[10] Letter to Gerrit Smith, December 25, 1855, quoted in Robert E. Riegel, "Women's Clothes and Women's Rights," *American Quarterly* 15 (1963), 391.

[11] *Unmasked,* or *The Science of Immortality. To Gentlemen.* By a Woman Physician and Surgeon (Philadelphia: Wm. H. Boyd, 1878), p. 98. This is a quote from a letter written by Mary E. Tillotson of Vineland, N.J. I would like to thank Bernard Horn for making this text available to me.

[12] Charles McCool Snyder, *Dr. Mary Walker: The Little Lady in Pants* (New York: Vantage Press, 1962), p. 29.

[13] Lawrence Langner, *The Importance of Wearing Clothes* (New York: Hastings House, 1959), pp. 53, 65.

[14] The various ways in which the British suffrage movement dedicated itself to the war effort and found fulfillment in it are documented by Midge Mackenzie, *Shoulder to Shoulder* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1975), pp. 293-317. Women are shown wearing pants both on the front and in the factories.

[15] Anaïs Nin, *Ladders to Fire* in *Cities of the Interior* (Chicago: The Swallow Press, 1974), pp. 37-8.

[16] C. L. Moore, *Jirel of Joiry* (New York: Paperback Library, 1969), p. 7. "Jirel Meets Magic" is reprinted in *More Women of Wonder,* ed. Pamela Sargent (New York: Vintage Books, 1976), pp. 3-52. Also see Moore's *Judgement Night* (1943) in which the armored heroine, Juille, fights for her father who had "used to want a son" (New York: Paperback Library, 1965), p. 6. See my essay on "C. L. Moore and the Conventions of Women's Science Fiction," in *Science*

This content downloaded from
132.187.253.28 on Wed, 27 Nov 2024 13:26:39 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

Fiction Studies XX (March 1980), 16-27. Adele Friedman, "Love, Sex and Marriage in French Folk Songs and Popular Imagery," unpublished paper read at a conference on Women, Culture, and Society at the University of California, Davis, on April 20, 1978. According to Tristram Potter Coffin there are "two dozen, British broadside ballads in which a girl, impatient for her lover's return from war or irritated because her parents have pressed her lover to sea, dresses in man's attire and goes in search of him." See *The Female Hero in Folklore and Legend* (New York: Pocket Books, 1978), p. 237. Delores Palomo discusses Margaret Cavendish's plays in terms of female warriors and female sons, i.e., female characters dressed as men who trick not only other characters but the audience as well, in "Margaret Cavendish: Defining the Female Self," forthcoming in *Women's Studies* special issue on *Women Poets* (1980), edited by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar.

[17]Robert Stoller, *Sex and Gender* (N.Y.: Jason Aronsoh, 1975), 142-58; Deborah Heller Feinbloom, *Transvestites and Transsexuals* (New York: Delta Books, 1976), pp. 10-32; Natalie Davis, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1975), pp. 124-151.

[18]See Ovid, *Metamorphoses,* Book XII, trans. Rolfe Humphries (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1955), pp. 291, 299-301. Subsequent citations appear in the text.

[19]Photographs of Sarah Bernhardt playing Hamlet, the Duc de Reichstadt and Pelleas appear in Joanna Richardson, *Sarah Bernhardt and Her World* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1977), pp. 161, 168, and 179. For a discussion of Marlene Dietrich's exploitation of military uniforms see Alexander Walker, "Marlene Dietrich: At Heart a Gentleman," *Sex in the Movies* (Baltimore, Md.: Pelican Books, 1969), pp. 88-93.

[20]Photographs and an interview with Dorothy Azner appear in *Women and the Cinema: A Critical Anthology,* ed. Karyn Kay and Gerald Peary (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1977), pp. 12, 16, and 167. A photograph of Bonheur's "Permission de Travestisement" is reprinted in Karen Peterson and J. J. Wilson, *Women Artists* (New York: Harper Colophon, 1976), p. 77. This permit from the police raises the interesting subject of cross-dressing and the law. Morton L. Enelow has argued that: "Exhibitionism, voyeurism and transvestism are lumped together by the law and viewed as 'public nuisance offenses' " punishable as acts disturbing or alarming the public. See "Public Nuisance Offences" in *Sexual Behavior and the Law,* ed. Ralph Slovenko (Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas Pub., 1965), p. 278. But a comprehensive history of the law and transvestism apparently still needs to be written. A photograph of Dorothy Sayers, "in a characteristically mannish costume and hat," appears in Janet Hitchman, *Such A Strange Lady* (New York: Avon, 1975), p. 96.

[21]Willa Cather, *My Antonia* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1970), pp. 149-50. Dorothy Richardson *The Tunnel* in *Pilgrimage 2* (New York: Popular Library, 1976), pp. 148-9.

[22]George Eliot, "Woman in France," *The Essays of George Eliot,* ed. Thomas Pinny (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), p. 53.

[23]Elizabeth Barrett Browning, "To George Sand, A Recognition," in *The World Split Open,* ed. Louis Bernikow (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), p. 113-4.

[24]Elaine Showalter in *A Literature of Their Own* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), pp. 133-52 discusses male characters as extensions of

This content downloaded from
132.187.253.28 on Wed, 27 Nov 2024 13:26:39 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

female authors.

[25]Muriel Rukeyser, "The Poem as Mask," *No More Masks!: An Anthology of Poems by Women,* ed. Florence Howe and Ellen Bass (New York: Anchor Books, 1973), p. 1.

[26]Hayden Herrera, "Frida Kahlo—'Sacred Monsters,' " *Ms.* (February, 1978), pp. 29-31. Diego Rivera himself describes the pain he inflicted on Kahlo through his infidelities in *My Life, My Art* (New York: The Citadel Press), pp. 225-6, 284. About himself, he writes: "If I loved a woman, the more I loved her, the more I wanted to hurt her. Frida was only the most obvious victim of this disgusting trait," p. 207-8.

[27]Ann Sutherland Harris and Linda Nochlin, *Women Artists 1550-1950.* (New York: Knopf, 1977), pp. 335-6. Kahlo underwent some 35 operations resulting from an accident that fractured her spine when she was 15 years old. While both in life and in art, Kahlo usually presented herself in traditionally feminine garb, Bertram D. Wolfe argues that this too was a compensation: "She made up for the accidental crippling of her frail body by turning herself into one of the most effective works of art." See *The Fabulous Life of Diego Rivera* (New York: Stein and Day, 1963), p. 395.

[28]Meryle Secrest, *Between Me and Life: A Biography of Romaine Brooks* (London: Macdonald's and Jane's, 1976), pp. 8, 29-34.

[29]Bertha Harris, "The More Profound Nationality of Their Lesbianism: Lesbian Society in the 1920's," *Amazon Expedition: A Lesbian Feminist Anthology,* ed. Phillis Birkby, Bertha Harris, Jill Johnson, Esther Newton, and Jane O'Wyatt (New York: Times Change Press, 1973), p. 79. The identification with aristocratic revolt strengthens the tie with Byron. In this connection, it is worth remembering that Byron himself had a mistress who dressed as a man. See Ethel Colburn Mayne, *Byron* (London: Methuen & Co., 1912), I, pp. 93-4. Byron told Medwin that he used to dress a lover up to pass as his brother Gordon, this at a time when he was also famous for keeping a tame bear for fellowship at Cambridge.

[30]Radclyffe Hall, *The Well of Loneliness* (New York: Coucici-Friede, 1934), pp. 52-3. Subsequent references appear parenthetically in the text.

[31]Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own,* pp. 248-9; Virginia Spencer Carr, *The Lonely Hunter: A Biography of Carson McCullers* (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1975), pp. 159, 167, and 338. Djuna Barnes' portrait of Barney in *The Ladies Almanack* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), p. 8 explains she had "developed in the Womb of her most gentle Mother to be a Boy," and when she came forth an Inch or so less than this," she had the audacity to explain to her father that she was "more commendable" than the son he desired "seeing that I do it without the tools for the Trade." Susan Sniader Lanser explores Barnes' lesbian humor in "Speaking in Tongues: *Ladies Almanack* and the Language of Celebration," *Frontiers* IV (Fall 1979), pp. 39-46.

[32]Jane Rule, *Lesbian Images* (New York: Pocket Books, 1976), p. 60. The stigmata are certainly also related to this novel's Biblical subject.

[33]Havelock Ellis, *Sexual Inversion, Studies in the Psychology of Sex,* Vol. IV (Philadelphia: F. A. Davis Co., 1929), p. 222. The trapped soul theory of homosexuality in Ellis, Krafft-Ebbing, and Carpenter is discussed by Barbara Fassler, "Theories of Homosexuality as Sources of Bloomsbury's Anthology," *Signs* V (Winter 1979), pp. 237-51.

[34]Arthur Calder-Marshall, *Havelock Ellis* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis,

This content downloaded from
132.187.253.28 on Wed, 27 Nov 2024 13:26:39 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

1969), pp. 138-43, 180. Not only does Calder-Marshall argue that Edith Ellis felt herself to have been turned into an invert by her husband, he further speculates that she resented being used as a case history and a source of information, as did Olive Schreiner.

[35]Renée Vivien, who is also analyzed by Ellis in *Sexual Inversion,* p. 200, is discussed in relation to male masquerading by George Wickes in *The Amazon of Letters* (New York: Popular Library, 1978), p. 71. Background information on Barney and Vivien appears in Jeannette Foster, *Sex Variant Women in Literature* (Baltimore, Md.: Diana Press, 1975), pp. 154-73.

[36]Phyllis Rose, *Women of Letters: A Life of Virginia Woolf* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), pp. 192-93. Many historians of lesbianism in this period focus on the difference between *Orlando's* frivolity and the tragic dimensions of *The Well of Loneliness.* See, for example, Dolores Klaich, *Woman + Woman* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974), pp. 189, 199-201. For a discussion of Woolf's love of women, see "Women Alone Stir My Imagination: Lesbianism and the Cultural Tradition," *Signs* IV (Summer 1979), pp. 718-39.

[37]The quotation from Jesus to Simon Peter who wants Mary to leave because "women are not worthy of the Life" is quoted and discussed by Carolyn G. Heilbrun, *Toward a Recognition of Androgyny* (New York: Harper Colophon, 1973), p. 20. The story of Saint Pellagia who was "the archetype for the female transvestite saint" is recounted by Vern L. Bullough and Bonnie Bullough, *Sin, Sickness, and Sanity: A History of Sexual Attitudes* (New York: New American Library, 1977), p. 78. For a modern rendition of the Pope Joan legend, see Lawrence Durrell's *Pope Joan,* adapted from the Greek *Papissa Joanna* (1886) by Emmanuel Royidis (New York: Penguin Books, 1974).

[38]*The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson,* ed. Thomas H. Johnson (Boston: Little, Brown, 1960), J. 1737. Carson McCullers, *Reflections in a Golden Eye* (Cambridge, Mass.: Riverside Press, 1941), p. 40. Significantly, McCullers dedicated this book—which is about at least one character who "obtained within himself a delicate balance between the male and female elements"(p. 13)—to Annemarie Clarac-Schwarzenbach, a Swiss writer and cross-dresser with whom she was in love.

[39]Carson McCullers, "Isak Dinesen: In Praise of Radiance," *The Mortgaged Heart,* ed. Margareita G. Smith (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1971), p. 271.

[40]*Selected Writings of Gertrude Stein,* ed. Carl Van Vechten (New York: Vintage, 1962), p. 13. Unless otherwise indicated, all citations refer to this text. See the interview with Berthe Cleyrergue (Natalie Berney's housekeeper) where she says of Steio: "She frightened me. She dressed very strangely with long skirts that trailed along the ground and with her short cropped hair. I took her for a man. When I learned that she was a woman, I said: 'That's not true.' " "The Salon of Natalie Clifford Berney: An Interview with Berthe Clevrergue" by Gloria Feman Ornstein, *Signs* (Spring 1979), p. 489. Also see Catherine R. Stimpson, "The Mind, the Body, and Gertrude Stein," *Critical Inquiry* III (Spring 1977), pp. 489-506.

[41]Gertrude Stein, "Talks to Saint or Stories of Saint Remy" in *Painted Lace* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955), p. 111. I am indebted here to conversations with Tom Boll.

[42]Gertrude Stein, *Wars I Have Seen* (London: B. T. Batsford, 1945), p. 48-9.

[43]Gertrude Stein, *How to Write* (Paris: Plain Edition, 1931), p. 27. Subse-

This content downloaded from
132.187.253.28 on Wed, 27 Nov 2024 13:26:39 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

quent page references from this edition appear parenthetically in the text.

[44]Several critics have worked with the idea that Stein's language must be viewed as magical or incantatory. Allegra Stewart argues that mystic religiosity lies behind the seemingly trivial in *Gertrude Stein and the Present* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967); Michael Hoffman argues that Stein's "image of herself [as a saint] provides an interesting metaphor with which to interpret so simple and primitive an art of the surface and of the celebration of the ordinary as we find in *Tender Buttons.*" See *Gertrude Stein* (Boston: Twayne, 1976), p. 66. Norman Weinstein discusses "word mysticism" in *Gertrude Stein and the Literature of the Modern Consciousness* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1970), pp. 53-67.

[45]Djuna Barnes, *Nightwood* (New York: New Directions, 1961), p. 88. All quotations are parenthetically included in the text. The best critical treatment of this novel appears in Louis F. Kannenstine, *The Art of Djuna Barnes* (New York: New York University Press, 1977), pp. 86-127.

[46]Sylvia Plath, "Fever 103," *Ariel* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), p. 55.

[47]Wolfgang Lederer, M.D., *The Fear of Women* (New York; Harcourt Brace Jóvanovich, 1968), pp. 144-6. Olive Schreiner also celebrates a man who wears women's clothing in *The Story of an African Farm* (New York: Schocken, 1976).

[48]See p. 79 of *Nightwood* where Dr. O'Connor in bed causes Nora to realize that children actually "like Red Riding Hood and the wolf in bed," and p. 63 where Nora dreams of her grandmother (a surrogate for Robin), "dressed as a man, wearing a billycock and a crooked moustache, ridiculous and plump in tight trousers and a red waistcoat, her arms spread saying with a leer of love, 'My little sweetheart!' "

[49]Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment* (New York: Vintage, 1977), pp. 166-83; Erich Fromm, *The Forgotten Language: An Introduction to the Understanding of Dreams, Fairy Tales and Myths* (New York: Rinehart, 1951, p. 241.

[50]Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* (New York: Vintage), pp. 42-63; Iris Murdoch, *A Severed Head* (New York: Avon, 1961); Jean Stuggs, "Cousin Lewis," in *Women and Fiction,* ed. Susan Cahill (New York: New American Library, 1975), pp. 269-87; Ruth Wolff, *The Abdication* in *The New Women's Theatre,* ed. Honor Moore (New York: Vintage, 1977), pp. 341-454.

[51]H. D., *Tribute to Freud* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1974), pp. 80-1.

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

1. Mary Walker in 1912. Collection of the Library of Congress.

2. Baroness T'Serclaes and Mairi Chilsholm with their ambulance at the French Front. Courtesy of the Impérial War Museum.

3. Willa Cather. Courtesy of the Nebraska State Historical Society.

4. Frida Kahlo, *Self-Portrait with Cropped Hair.* Courtesy of The Museum of Modern Art. Gift of Edgar Kaufman.

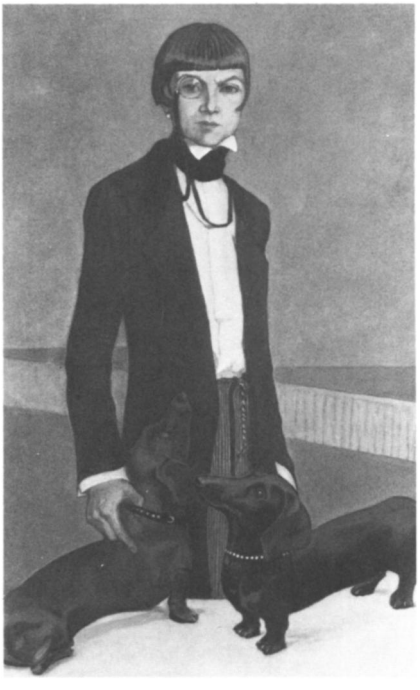
This content downloaded from
132.187.253.28 on Wed, 27 Nov 2024 13:26:39 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms

5. Romaine Brooks, *Self-Portrait*. Courtesy of the National Collection of Fine Arts, Smithsonian Institution; Gift of Romaine Brooks.

6. Cecil Beaton photograph of Gertrude Stein. Courtesy of Southeby's Belgravia.

7. Photograph of Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas. Courtesy of the Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Library, Yale University.

BELOW: painting by Romaine Brooks. *Una, Lady Trowbridge*. National Collection of Fine Arts, Smithsonian Institution. Gift of Romaine Brooks.



THE MASSACHUSETTS REVIEW
AUTUMN 1981

This content downloaded from
132.187.253.28 on Wed, 27 Nov 2024 13:26:39 UTC
All use subject to https://about.jstor.org/terms