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Female Dandyism: Defiance or Deference?

Abstract

This article investigates the characteristics of dandyism and its manifestations in women who worked and lived in the fields of politics, literature, visual and performing arts in the context of the early feminist movement at the turn of the nineteenth century Paris and London. In their interaction with the male attire, accessories, habits and lifestyles, these women challenged the dominant Victorian discourse by embodying the key attributes of the Regency dandy such as the aloofness, cynicism, provocation and decadence with the risk of becoming subject to social exclusion due to their preferences. While locating female masculinities within the discourse of masculinity with its own history, characteristics and representations in this ongoing process shaped by culture and choice, this approach endeavours to reveal female dandyism as an unusual yet alluring way of relating to oneself in spite of the patriarchal culture.

This reading builds on the definition of dandyism as a whole state of being in the creation and presentation of the self, and of the dandy as an outsider due to gender, sexuality and class. In the absence of a distinct literature on the subject, this article is an attempt to explore the characteristics of dandyism and its manifestations in women who occupied the role of the dandy while situating them in the context of the early feminist movement and the social, cultural and practical involvement they have undertaken in different activities. As a Western phenomenon, dandyism originated in England before it moved across the channel to France with the arrival of exiled French aristocrats who were trained in the traditions of London high society. Following the battle of Waterloo in 1815, French attitudes towards the English became more favourable, culminating in a second wave of Anglomania. The emergence of dandyism in France, as well as gentlemen's clubs, horse breeding and pigeon shooting was a response to the rise of the bourgeoisie and virtues such as efficacy and labour (Gill, 2009: 36). The dandy rejected these values as vulgar, cultivating an 'aristocratic' taste in a life of leisure, luxury, lavish spending and grandiose display. Devoting himself to performance and representation, the dandy played on his difference and eccentricity, aiming to illuminate the confines of the society and put them on trial by choosing an existence simply for personal pleasure and aesthetic fulfilment.

In line with the French poet Charles Baudelaire, my understanding of the term disagrees with the common assumption of dandyism as an aristocratic all-male exclusive display or 'a suit of clothes walking alone' hastily uttered by the Scottish writer Thomas Carlyle (Carlyle 1833-34). Baudelaire's *Le Peintre De La Vie Moderne/ The Painter of Modern Life* (1863) illustrates one of the most central characteristics of dandyism, that is, to play with the established system, to permeate the social consciousness of the age and to challenge it while shocking his public. As an unusual dandy 'lost in Bohemia', Baudelaire does not identify himself with the aristocracy as a class, whereas the austerity of his style with the cleanness of his linen, the formality of his speech and the politeness of his manner is a silent rebellion against the mediocre materialism of a democratic era. Defiant in a bourgeois society, he wore the black of the melancholy man, of the mourner of his own era with elegance, distinction and originality. Baudelaire's vision of the dandy, as the last representative of human pride in the midst of decadence against the rising tide of triviality and mediocrity is superb, without warmth and full of melancholy, like the setting sun (Moers 1960: pp 271-85). In the dandy, Baudelaire illustrates a new perspective on the human condition of the time which is the subjectivity and the alienation of the individual from the crowd. Baudelaire's Paris in *Les Fleurs du Mal/ The Flowers of Evil* (1857) is also animated by marginalized figures of the poet, the prostitute and the *flâneur* observing a dark city crowded with the challenges of modern life. This major transformation of the society is related to the urban environment in which Baudelaire's protagonists heroically attempt to escape uniformity, joined with the changes in work, housing and social relations caused by the rise of industrial capitalism in the crucial years of the birth of modernity.

Similar to Baudelaire, the experiences and sensations produced in the metropolitan environment is the starting point for the German sociologist and philosopher George Simmel's essay 'The Metropolis and Mental Life' in which he argues that 'the deepest problems of modern life derive from the claim of the individual to preserve the autonomy and individuality of his existence in the face of overwhelming social forces, of historical heritage, of external culture, and of the technique of life' (Simmel 1950: pp 409-424). According to Simmel, it is the very crowdedness of the city, which leads to the intense desire of the citizens to differentiate themselves from the crowd, among which the dandy, as an expression of individuality and social identity and an authority of taste and social behaviour, was exhibited before various types of audiences. By constantly affirming his originality in dress, behaviour,

and social relations, the dandy attempted to make of his person a work of art requiring a public, the mirror of society and conventional morality as a surface of which he could reflect (Nelson 2007: 138). In *Du Dandyism et de George Brummell/ Of Dandyism and of George Brummell* (1845), another influential nineteenth century essay on dandyism, the French author Jules Barbey D'Aurevilly transformed the superficial 'beau' of the British Isles into an intellectual being of psychological depth and liberated dandyism of its negative connotations. In the figure of the Regency dandy embodied in Brummell, Barbey showed that there is more to dandyism than a carefully chosen wardrobe by presenting the dandy as a spiritually superior being and defining as a new type of aristocrat, one whose social prestige would be based not on birth but on style. To Barbey, the dandy was a contradictory character, part a modern rebel and a new kind of social climber whose status depended less on blood and inheritance, part an aristocrat with good manners and impeccable taste who listened to an older, noble style. Sartorial superiority, which was based on an understated but studied elegance distinguished by its casual perfection, was reinforced by verbal wit and exquisite nonchalance, as the key attributes of dandyism were the authentic representation of the individual, the detachment, the sarcasm, the impertinence, the distrust and the provocation.

The terminology did not exist to identify women in men's-tailored clothes and accessories, inhabiting urban surroundings in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, although less controversial than dress reform but more subtly adoption signified a new form of opposition to the dominant culture. The gradual displacement of the dandy by the increase of a feminine imagery created women who assumed the visual strategy adopted earlier by the dandy. They came from different upbringing, education, social status and sexual preference, and yet, their choice of clothing were not isolated incidents, but suggested a collective respond to the cultural setting in which Modernism developed. By appropriating male discourses and male attire as a representation of independence as a conscious political choice or simply as a portrayal of personal aesthetics, these women fashioned an entirely new way of living. Ultimately, the multiple and contradictory models of female masculinity produced by these women regarding the intentions behind their self-presentation in the rebellion against, or the negotiation within the dominant Victorian discourse in the turmoil of two fast-growing cities raise two questions. Considering that the use of clothing might have had a subversive potential as a parody of male attire, did these women act systematically and consciously to achieve this position, or were they shaped by the same discourse and culture, and simply chose to negotiate

to maintain the very same position? The examples of women donning men's clothes dating back to classical Greek and Roman mythology, has continued in the Middle Ages with Christian female saints who crossed-dressed for religious reasons and became an inspiration, including heterosexual and same-sex romantic motives, patriotism, economic necessity, safety while travelling, criminality, desire for freedom and adventure (Velasco, 2000: 32). First attempts came from a wide range of women who repeatedly adopted men's clothes as a prelude to participating in food riots, demonstrations against enclosures or theatrical impersonations. As the driving force of cultural transformation in the creation of new gender relations in late nineteenth century, the stage became the key location for the dissemination of contemporaneous fashion styles. There were actresses, kept women and courtesans who lived in the flourishing atmosphere of gender experimentations in 1830s Paris; a cultural context where 'female anomaly was viewed at once as a logical impossibility, a pathology, and an instance of moral monstrosity or sin' (Gill, 2007: pp 167-181). Women sought to position themselves on the same platform with men by denaturalizing the historical connection between the male body and male attire, supported by other examples of women with a collective historical knowledge about how to become a man via theatrical and everyday life evidences. In advocating the creative power and modernity of surfaces, artifices and theatricality, Baudelaire had prepared the way for a modern woman, her clothes and her representation in the street, the city and suburbs (Chadwick and Latimer, 2003: 208). In Barbey's works as well, one encounters representations of narcissistic coldness, masculine self-assurance and sexual ambiguity embodied in the figure of the female dandy. Similar to the male dandy as the declaration of the self-produced modern individual, the courtesans, who strove for originality in their lifestyle as a whole rather than merely their toilette, functioned as a cipher upon which both men and women could project their fantasies (Gill 2009: 112). As a producer of new fashions, a consumer, and a consumable item, the courtesan destabilized the opposition between production and consumption, masculinity and femininity. Furthermore, she overcame the dimorphism that split the male and female spheres due to her way of expressing sexual pleasure, drinking, gambling, and swearing like a man, and having masculine characteristics such as coldness and insolence. Like the fashion that defined her identity, the courtesan represented the last refuge of 'the most parched and imagination-starved' (Benjamin [1982, B1a, 2] 1999: 64) century by undermining a system of values through gaudy conformity. Through her nonchalant manners and impudent expressions, the courtesan initiated the newest

and most daring styles using her enormous wealth and status as an outsider, displaying her persona in Parisian theatres, restaurants, cafés and dance halls. Her remarkable gowns, extravagant jewels, lavishly decorated mansions, superb horses and carriages, notable lovers and outrageous exploits did certainly rivet the public's attention (Majer 2010: 210-13). The courtesan, as 'a creature of show, an object of public pleasure' (Baudelaire [1863] 1995: 37), became a creature outside nature and beyond gender while representing the dangerous seductions of modernity maintained by fashion and commodity culture.

The late nineteenth century metropolis, while becoming a disputed arena for women who occupied the public spaces of the city on rather different terms than men did, created the New Woman, *flâneurs*, shop girls, music-hall performers and prostitutes claiming for a position on the city streets. They assumed men's-tailored clothes as a strategy with its symbols of male autonomy and authority to confront the inequities of culturally-defined categories of masculinity and femininity; to escape from the traditional roles and societal expectations of the heterosexual world; to achieve social and political rights given only to men in the society; to deconstruct the binary sex/gender/desire system as a performance on a theatrical stage; to claim masculinity and pursue maleness as a male subject position that goes along with it; to signal sexual orientation believing themselves to have a gender identity at odds with their anatomy. In fashionable circles, aristocratic European women began to adopt physical activities due to significant developments in their social lives. It began with the sport of croquet in the 1860s and continued with the introduction of tennis, archery, yachting, hunting, shooting and golf in the 1870s and 1880s, all of which requiring a particular ensemble of dress. In her study on the English designer Redfern, curator Susan North reads the late seventeenth century riding habit as a model from which to adapt new garments for the recently adopted sports. Made of the same tightly woven wools as men's clothing and fashioned as a tailor-made ensemble, the female riding habit consisted of trousers and a bodice tailored to resemble a man's jacket and shirt-front, with boots and a top hat. Although the riding habit remained traditional, allowing a degree of movement in design and fabrics suitable for outdoor environment, it carried radical implications resembling the man's tailored suit while revealing its wearer's femininity (North 2008: 145-68).

Female dandyism which undoubtedly has some foundation in the figure of the courtesan continued to flourish and as the gender divisions became more formalized over the course of the nineteenth century, gender impersonation became a part of the stage to a

fascinated, yet troubled bourgeois audience. In the early nineteenth century, the tradition had flourished in entertainment forms such as comic opera, burlesque, extravaganza, and pantomime. However, unlike her eighteenth and early nineteenth century predecessors, the late nineteenth century male impersonator did not use masculine attire to heighten her femininity, but to suppress it in order to accomplish the illusion of being male (Aston 1988: pp 247-257). As a theatrical tradition, male impersonation ranges back to the Restoration stage, but has never received as much attention from theatre historians as her biologically masculine counterpart, the female impersonator. Female impersonation responded to man's longing for woman's vulnerable extravagance while male impersonation responded to woman's longing for independence available to young men. In contrast to the ancient and ritualized sanctions of men portraying women on stage by all-male casts, female adoption of male privileges has occurred as a novelty and a sensational turn, employed to emphasize femininity rather than to mimic maleness. Both practices were soon to be neutered by the intruding manners of the late Victorian stage, even though the creation of glamour drag and male impersonation on the variety stage were potent and valuable strategies for expanding the range of gender identities. This phenomenon began to appear in the late 1860s, reached its greatest popularity with one of the most celebrated British actresses Vesta Tilley (1864-1952) before World War I, and died out except for occasional nostalgic survivals (Senelick 1993: 80-95). Some male impersonators who carried over their cross-dressing practices into their everyday lives had a relation to masculinity far beyond theatricality, displaying in public the signs and symbols of an erotized and politicized female masculinity. Others emphasized their femininity in their off stage activities, thereby making their onstage cross-dressing much less threatening to their audiences. Within the context of performance practice, a woman who assumes male clothes in order to play with ideas about gender in relationship with an audience makes political and social statements, and exploits sexual ambivalence to her own advantage. Yet, male impersonation, regardless of its intention or potential, might be seen as an act of collusion or self-denial, and the male impersonator might represent both an eloquent and luxurious sexual ambiguity and a threatening homosexual potential, depending on the subjectivity of the audience.

Throughout the late nineteenth century and into the early twentieth century, Tilley performed as various male characters and portrayed beautiful youths. Her gender performances were not simply about subversion, since she offered a platform for young men in the audience to articulate their own style of masculinity and cultivate beauty expressed through clothing,

hats, watch chains, monocles, cigars or canes. As a female, Tilley employed cross-dressing to construct masculinity in addition to her own femininity using appropriate clothes, poses, and accessories, which were all associated with men and masculinities at that time. She assumed the identity of the dandy, who, by virtue of his own sense of superior taste in clothing, already had established a deliberate distance by standing outside and slightly above the rest of the society. Her slight figure and her ability to not simply mimic, but master Victorian notions of masculinity that were centred on the body gave many clerks, shop assistants, and other lower-middle-class men in the audience an idol of their very own to follow (Banville 2008: 112-142). Tilley's performances of masculinity on the Music Hall stage and her performances of femininity off stage participate in what Judith Halberstam calls 'female masculinity' and the overall construction of Victorian masculinity. Indebted to American post-structuralist and philosopher Judith Butler's pioneering work *Gender Trouble* (1990) on gender performativity by suggesting that there are multiple forms of female masculinity within our present culture that are not occupied by lesbianism, Halberstam argues that we cannot know for certain about historical relations between same-sex desire and female masculinities (Halberstam 1998: 98). The modern lesbian identity, which was shaped from a bricolage of cultural sources, including theatrical images, utopian fiction, Greek and Roman literature, medical texts, the flourishing male homosexual culture of the time, and the initiative of women claiming a new public sexual identity recovered it as a valuable shock tactic to unsettle and undermine the preconceptions of the men the impersonators imitated (Vicinus 1996: 190). The years 1880-1920 are especially significant since they mark an important shift for so-called feminine and masculine lesbians who turned to the male impersonator as representative of their sense of displacement. The Music Hall dandy in evening dress re-fashioned as androgynous hero of the marginal, provided material for wealthy Anglo-American women from which to construct a lesbian identity by meticulously appropriating male symbols like cigar, tie, walking stick and monocle.

The sartorial lexicon of the dandy practice offered the American painter Romaine Brooks (1874-1970) and the English author Radclyffe Hall (1880-1943) a model for negotiating a social position for themselves that shared signifiers with the dress of the modern woman. The elegant lesbianism of Paris, evoked by Brooks' extraordinary portraits of herself and her friends, exploited the symbolism of the dandy as a visible signifier of lesbian desire challenging the stability of all masculinities in spite of their relationship to biological sex (Lucchesi 2001: 153-58). Brooks transformed the 'male' cultural connotations of the dandy in

early twentieth century Paris and London into a 'female' homoerotic sexuality in a time when the lesbian subculture only existed as a pale version of the male, except for the portrait of Radclyffe Hall that adorned *Sunday Express* as shorthaired, bow-tied, betrousered, left hand in pocket, smoking a cigarette (Weeks 1977: 88). While some second-generation feminists associated themselves with elements of the 'third sex' persona, Radclyffe Hall created the sexually 'inverted' protagonist Stephen in *The Well of Loneliness*, which she publicly had to defend in 1928. Stephen posits a gender identity that constitutes itself through clothing since cross-dressing is not a masquerade for Hall, who thought of herself as a man choosing simple, tailor-made clothes. This aspect which emphasizes her ambiguous sexual identity is undeniably palpable in Stephen, who embodies 'the New Woman's painful position between traditional, political and social categories and for the lesbian struggle to define and assert an identity' (Newton 1984: 557-75). As the feminist philosopher and psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva states regarding women who attempt male power, they do not overturn the male hierarchy, but bring into question. While Tilley drew attention to the silliness of the male order, Hall seemed to embody the captivating aloofness and vulnerability of the male impersonator (Vicus 1996: 196). For Hall, theatrical transvestism provided a model for the mannish lesbian as she strongly disapproved of women passing as men and believed that the impeccable tailoring of Vesta Tilley's gentlemen best represented her own sense of belonging to the 'third sex' (Baker 1985: 21). By purchasing her clothes at a theatrical *costumier* as part of her male costume, she even managed to capture some of Tilley's embroidered elegance in flowered silks. For women who adopted male attire outside the bounds of social decorum dictated by economic necessity such as Hall, female cross-dressing represented a denial of the feminine and a demeaning of the forms of male authority. Although employed as a sign of liberation from the heterosexual norms and patriarchal authority, the adoption of men's-tailored clothes reinforced the power of these constraints all the more (Benstock 1987: 181).

The male dandy who attached a great importance to his public image, turning his body into a work of art in the way he posed, dressed, and behaved was exploited in various forms, by various groups of women. To the lesbian expatriate collective that found the ultimate habitat in Paris, becoming modern meant a 'necessary cultural, sexual and personal freedom to explore their creative intuitions' (Benstock, 1987: 14). As the rationale behind this segregation varied widely from a desire to signal a professional identity to a sexual preference, this conscious defiance suggested a significant declaration by women who positioned an agency in everyday

life in spite of the patriarchal culture. By adopting male attire with symbols of autonomy and authority in a particular way, women created a gender with its own cultural history rather than one that is exclusively derived from male masculinity. While they were shaped by the given discourse negotiating and maintaining their positions, women of the turn of the nineteenth century also acted systematically and intentionally by occupying the negotiable, complex and femininity relational aspects of masculinity.

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