

# **Girls Will Be Girls: A Critique of Female Gender Performance in Fashion**

By

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*What am I, Loby?" she suggested – rather than asked – rhetorically. "I'm the key image in an advertising campaign. I'm the good/bad wild thing whom everybody wants, wants to be like – who prefers ninety-nine instead of one. I'm the one whom men search out from seeding to seeding. I'm the one whom all the women style their hair after, raise and lower their hems and necklines as mine rise and lower. The world steals my witticisms, my gestures, even my mistakes, to try out on each new lover."*

Le Dove, *The Einstein Intersection* by Samuel Delany



Recent moves in sociological thought have theorized a concept of gender apart from sex. While sex remains within the confines of biology, our understanding of gender is multi-layered and complex. In short, gender is a constructed creation; built brick by brick through performance. As Judith Butler writes in her seminal book, *Bodies That Matter*, “When the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequences of *man* and *masculine* might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and *woman* and *feminine* a male body as easily as a female one” (Butler 6). Butler’s work is a radical shift from a history traditionally molded around a set of biological differences as the basis for performance at home, in the workplace, and at play. So are we, as a culture and people, also left to float when we seek to negate the binaries of ‘man’ or ‘woman?’ Where do we redefine the limits and boundaries of gender, if such fences exist? To answer these questions, I will delve into the multidimensional realm of women’s high fashion. With a runway show, designers steer and sculpt the gender performance of female bodies the world over. Fashion is both a display of gender performance and a creation of the performative gesture.

As I wrestled with the idea of ‘constructing’ normal, I chose to focus my studies on the concept of gender performance. “From this theoretical perspective, gender is less an essential characteristic of the individual than it is a series of performative gestures that the individual learns to replicate” (Hollinger 207). Using Veronica Hollinger’s statement as a starting point, we commence to engage with the performance of gender. As a gay man and occasional drag performer, the thought that gender could be performed was not new or revolutionary. Once each semester, as part of the Rainbow Union charity event, I

take the stage as Miss Monique Chou-Chou, a wildly unfeminine drag queen. My role as Monique is clear performance. I am on a stage, there are lights, and there are dollar bills being stuffed down my panties. As part of my research, I made excursions to the Garden, a gay dance club that places its fabulous drag performers on stage every Saturday night at midnight. I informally interviewed drag queens and kings and everyday folk to test their knowledge of gender performance. For some time, I remained mired in the flamboyant and dramatized gender expression of the drag performance. Eventually, however, I came to the revolutionary realization that, even if no tips were being tossed, gender was performed every day as we dressed ourselves. Keeping Hollinger's concept of the performative gesture in mind, I felt ready to move forward with my analysis of gender performance. In particular, I chose to tackle a topic I appreciate from afar but am not intimately familiar with: women's *haute couture*.

The western fashions of women (and here I write of primarily of European and American tastes) are constantly shifting codes of performance. Designers and trends slip in and out of the public consciousness at daunting speeds. There are dozens of magazines and more than a handful of TV stations dedicated to keeping up with the hottest trends, the models, and the designers, who set the trends and drape 'docile' bodies with their productions. "Gender displays, like other rituals, can iconically reflect fundamental features of the social structure; but just as easily, these expressions can counterbalance substantive arrangements and compensate for them. If anything, then, displays are a symptom, not a portrait" (Goff 8). The world of fashion is a reflection of our culture, but also a place where our culture is tugged forward. "But "Fashion" can not logically be reified as a magic power that causes women to behave in ways contrary to their own

interests” (Steele 35). Instead, fashion requires ‘buy-in’ from women. For a designer to succeed, for a fashion trend to take flight and become a mainstay, women must desire the clothes, purchase them, and wear them out. In this manner, fashion is typical of a Foucauldian creation. “Power is strong...because, as we are beginning to realize, it produces effects at the level of desire” (Foucault 59). The level of desire is found inside of the individual. The process of shopping and selecting a piece of clothing is a visible display of this internalization. Each person elects to invest themselves in a hierarchy of meaning that supports their concept of identity formation by selecting their dress. When we see supermodels on the cover of *Vogue*, when we watch the latest celebrity *du jour* walk down the red carpet and comment, “I’m wearing Gucci,” we desire the clothes and the images they create. The woman who stands in front of the dressing room mirror and twirls in a new prom dress runs a series of internal processes at the level of desire. The individual desires the dress because of how the dress makes her feel. This feeling is indicative of a power structure, maintained by designers, celebrities, and award shows. Fashion is another form of power.

To address the topic of female gender performance in high fashion, I have selected a sample of representative topics. Using the corset and women’s fashion magazines, I will examine the contradictory and complex nature of fashion’s history. To illustrate the power of female gender performance more clearly, I have selected two designers to survey in detail. Each designer represents an opposing house of *haute couture*, and a different way to adorn and interact with the female figure. Finally, with the help of estranged subjects, I will attempt to move female gender expression through clothing into a new future.

Fashion intersects with and infuses our lives. Some of us are quite circumspect in our approach to daily clothing choices; others are less so. Regardless of our own effort in the morning routine (admittedly an afternoon routine for some college students) to cloth ourselves, we can be confident that our choices will have an impact on the way in which the world perceives us. Apparel determines the expectations one person has of another and contributes significantly to the impressions we form of others (Giles and Chavasse 1975). In certain circles, clothes make the (wo)man. What one wears to an interview, on the job, or to a social gathering will influence any subsequent perceptions of that individual's tastes and abilities. The history of fashion is a complex and freewheeling topic. I sought a starting point, and with bias, I moved toward an easy target: the corset. As Valerie Steele elaborates, "Historians argue that especially during the Victorian era, corsetry functioned as a coercive apparatus through which patriarchal society controlled women and exploited their sexuality" (Steele 1). Along with the historians, my assumptions on the corset as a restrictive, hurtful example of oppression were well-seated. However, Steele's book, *The Corset: A Cultural History*, splits asunder the belief structure built around the sometimes steel, sometimes whalebone, recently constructed of Lycra, corset. "Corsetry was not one monolithic, unchanging experience that all unfortunate women experienced before being liberated by feminism. It was a situated practice that meant different things to different people at different times" (Steele 1). For as a number of my good friends reminded me, the icon of late 80's and early 90's sexual liberation, Madonna, wore two Gaultier corsets on stage, one in shell-pink satin and the other in gold. Steele's commentary on corsets is a representative starting point for the conversation on female gender performance. Fashion, as a complex and constantly

shifting dialogue between a woman and the world around her, means different things to different individuals. How we dress ourselves in the morning might be a flippant act, but the ripples that spread from those actions are waves of loud language.

Current fashion trends are often contradictory and difficult to follow. To illustrate, Margaret Atwood writes:

The basic Female Body comes with the following accessories: garter belt, panty-girdle, crinoline, camisole, bustle, brassiere, stomacher, chemise, virgin zone, spike heels, nose ring, veil, kid gloves, fish-net stockings, fichu, bandeau, Merry Widow, weepers, chokers, barrettes, bangles, beads, lorgnette, feather boa, basic black, compact, Lycra stretch one-piece with modesty panel, designer peignoir, flannel nightie, lace teddy, bed, head. (Goldstein 1)

The reader will notice that Atwood's "Female Body" comes with a variety of conflicting accessories. The veil, kid gloves, and flannel nightie are demure, more traditional reflections of female performance. The nose ring, lace teddy, feather boa, and spike heels are radical expressions of sexuality or subversion. Although we have traversed through waves of feminism, many of the 'traditional' forms of female expression are preserved. "Ad designers still employ the prominent appeal of traditional feminism or its variations. The mythic temptress, the mother figure, and the virgin appear in countless...ads" (Manca 50). To promote products and sell the materials, our ads continue to reflect the traditional roles ascribed to the sexes. These grand narratives hold fast, moored on traditions of gender performance and expression. To illustrate more clearly the dichotomous expression of female fashion, stop into the supermarket and leaf through any one of the dozens of fashion magazines devoted to *haute couture*.

Fashion magazines reflect the confusion of female fashion gender performance with both their print and graphics. “Women of fashion become the ‘speaking’ subjects of a symbolic system which inseparably entangles signs of oppression and liberation within the images of the fashionable feminine body” (Bernstock et al. 60). The women’s fashion magazine is a strange beast because it has a dichotomous nature. The magazines offer pictures of women standing exposed and strong in outdoor settings because they claim to state that the modern woman is confident and equal. She is unafraid to strike dangerous poses in high heels and daring clothing. However, the same magazine, if you continue to turn the pages, will go on to tell tales of battered women. The columnist will decry the plight of these abused women, while providing admonishments and statistics on the awful state of our society. The problem, of course, is that the magazine fails to make explicit the fact that the modern woman is also the one being abused. At the same time that *Cosmopolitan*, *InStyle*, and *Elle* are printing essays and articles on liberation and freedom, they are providing images that reinforce and solidify the patriarchal system. Our fashion magazines, exhibiting the thoughts and writings of some wonderful contemporary feminists, new thinkers, and brilliant designers, have not been able to escape the traditional forms of femininity. Leslie Rabine continues in her critique of the fashion magazine.

It leaves the woman of fashion with two bodies, both of which are represented in contemporary fashion magazines. One body, represented in fashion photographs and upbeat copy, is the confident, free, sexually powerful image that readers can reproduce through skillful use of clothing and makeup. The other, which could be called the sociopolitical body, is enmeshed in a network of power relations that still subordinate women economically, politically, sexually, physically, and through a symbolic



system that requires her objectification. (Bernstock et al.  
66)

As I review the current trends of female gender performance, the schema critiqued by Rabine is evident. We are surrounded by positive images that portray women in new, progressive ways. At the same time, however, we exist in a culture that seeks out ‘traditional values’ and ‘moral correctness’ in ‘appropriate dress.’ We continue to work within a moralized culture that connects how little a woman is wearing to some supposed degree of promiscuity. Frighteningly, recent judgments in courts across the country have established a precedent defense for rape: “what she was wearing told me that she wanted it.” Astoundingly, men have indeed been found innocent with this defense.

For further inquiry into our fashionable dichotomy, I have selected two designers that offer opposing spectrums in dressing women.

*Bill Blass is the quintessential American designer. He was able to translate and perfect the American woman’s dream. His designs are powerful in that they arise from a dialogue between Bill and the American woman. - Issey Miyake.*

As a young man from Fort Wayne, Indiana, Bill Blass traveled to New York City in 1939 to reinvent himself. In the process, he managed to transform the image of American fashion. Blass designed dresses for socialites, First Ladies, and movie stars. For decades he defined the look of women of stature. Along with the picture I have provided, I have selected a few comments on Blass’s work.

There's a protective quality to his approach to dressing a woman. She should never feel compromised by what she wears. She can be sexy without being vulgar, festive without being ridiculous, dignified without being dowdy. (O'Hagan et al. 14)



Blass's talent lay in creating simple, uncontrived clothing that enhanced the female form. Never driven by the need to shock the public or rock the fashion world with dramatic seasonal innovations, his casually elegant designs echoed the lines of contemporary fashion. (O'Hagan et al. 20)

The timelessness tells of the abiding creative genius of Bill Blass – an American designer. (O'Hagan et al. 28)

In the first example I have selected, by Bill Blass for Maurine Rentner, Spring 1968, the designer clothes his models in lace and pink. Both of the women are

wearing pink hose with white ballet shoes. The models are delicate, demure, and dainty.

There is a doll-like quality to the setting. The models are draped in the scene, almost as if a large hand is soon entering the shot to straighten and mold the dolls. Blond hair is curled and dangles off the face. This is a scene of virginity and innocence. Bill Blass is remembered as a 'classic' designer. As is reflected in the comments quoted above, he is representative of appropriate female dress.

*Armani started just one revolution, twenty-five years ago, by placing a man's jacket on a woman and combining it not just with a shirt and waistcoat, but with corsets or pieces of precious fabric covering bare breasts. – Franca Sozzani*

Like Blass, Giorgio Armani grew up apart from a level of privilege and fashion. His creations, however, are another matter entirely. To illustrate a sense of Armani, I have included the following picture and comments:

Twenty-five years after Armani designed his first collection, he continues to acknowledge the mutability of gender by making clothing for men and women that is nearly indistinguishable. (*Armani* 91)

While Armani subverts traditional gender dress codes with his more androgynous designs, he also creates garments that reinforce stereotypes of difference. (*Armani* 117)

For some, the suit symbolized the equality many feminists were fighting for. For others, it represented another patriarchal convention that equated success in the workplace with a male role model...Armani's suits are often lauded for having offered the first credible option...in other words, Armani allowed women to escape the burden of either/or. (*Armani* 127)

The selection I have taken, from photographer Tom Munro, shows



a male and a female figure. The female is draped in stripes, running along a full pants suit. She wears saddle shoes and a tie. This is not the typical gender expression for a female. The model's hair is slicked back, while her hand positions the cigarette between

her lean form and the male presence seated on the stairs. The woman maintains her sexuality through the use of shadow and lip gloss.

To facilitate a closer comparison, I have placed a second set of images from each designer side by side.



Once the images are coupled, it is simple to draw the distinctions between the design concepts of each fashion house. The Blass figure is bending her knee, a pose typical of a need to be supported or to flee. The woman is on a pedestal, removed from the ground and against a backdrop of white. The Armani woman performs her gender in a less traditional fashion. She straddles a bike and wears the black tie – along with a necklace

of beads. This woman is straddling the bike – but also the boundaries of gender, establishing herself as an androgynous figure in the fashion.

As we construct normal, it is easy to write that Blass is the evil patriarchal foundation, while Armani envisions a future. I do not believe it is as simple as that. There are women who desire the Blass figure – he was astoundingly popular, even after his retirement in 2000. The desire of these women is not invalid because it reinforces a code of female gender expression that is founded on oppression. Before blaming Blass, we must move to a culture that allows and cherishes gender expression in all forms. Although the cuts of Armani are fashionable in issues of *L'Uomo Vogue*, the woman who walks down the street in a modified tux will be derided. Armani's androgynous fashions have not managed to escape from the runways of Milan or the shows of New York. As Susan Brownmiller comments, "Men resigned themselves to a lack of individuality in clothes a long time ago, but women still hold out the hope for clothes that are comfortable, feminine, and appropriate for work in one all-purpose outfit" (Brownmiller 101). Are we able to move to the realization of this outfit? Are we able to entice both the Blass and the Armani into a seamless design?

On the title page of this paper, I used a quote from Samuel Delany's book, *The Einstein Intersection*. This science fiction novella presents to the reader three sexes. "Le Dove," the character I have quoted, is of the third sex. S/he is the ultimate symbol of desire and romance. In *Le Dove* I believe we can seek out the true androgynous gender performance we seek. This character is able to assume both male and female moods as the need strikes. Men look good in corsets. A tie is a strong statement for a woman. In performing gender, I advocate fluidity – an ability to cross genders and interests in a

manner that sanctions individual comfort and expression. In our current fashion, we perform contradictory gestures, pushing for progress in gender expression but resigning ourselves to archaic grand narratives. Designers today ‘provide’ women with both ‘classic’ performance and ‘subversive’ possibilities. With effort and cultural support we may one day move to a middle-ground of gender performance.

*“You’re a bunch of psychic manifestations, multisexed and incorporeal, and you – you’re all trying to put in the limiting mask of humanity. Turn again, Lobey. Seek somewhere outside the frame of the mirror –”*

PHAEDRA, *The Einstein Intersection* by Samuel Delany

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  2. Ally Dunne wearing white, silk chiffon, draped sheath dress with gray off-shoulder collar by Bill Blass, Spring 1989. Photograph by David Seidner.

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