Forum Introduction: Addressing Gender, Gendering Dress

Chris Mowat

Clothes are there to have fun with and experiment with and play with. What’s really exciting is that all of these lines are just kind of crumbling away. When you take away ‘There’s clothes for men and there’s clothes for women,’ once you remove any barriers, obviously you open up the arena in which you can play.

Harry Styles

You give dresses dyed scarlet and violet to the famous adulteress:
Do you want to give a deserved gift? Send a toga.

Martial’s Epigrams

I remember how bemused I felt, those first few months, when I saw my reflection in a window. It’s true that she wasn’t really me anymore, this tall slut with legs enhanced by six-inch heels. The timid, husky masculine girl had vanished in the blink of an eye. Once I had my gear on, even my masculine traits, my confidence, my way of walking super-quickly, became hyperfeminine traits.

Virginie Despentes

In December 2020, Harry Styles made fashion history as the first cisgender man to feature solo on the cover of American Vogue. What also makes the cover stand out is the fact that he wore a blazer over a dress, combining a traditional menswear piece with a traditional womenswear piece. In the corresponding interview, as quoted in the first epigraph above, Styles commented on the excitement he finds in removing the lines between ‘men’s clothing’ and ‘women’s clothing’ and opening up the opportunities for anyone to wear whatever they want.

It is perhaps obvious to state that clothing itself has no gender per se, but it is equally obvious (and equally important) to remind ourselves that clothing is gendered. The lines that Styles sees as crumbling away were until recently strictly enforced in the United States, and from the mid-nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century, over forty municipalities passed laws that forbade a person from appearing in public ‘in a dress not belonging to his or her sex’. These laws encouraged the general public, as well as law enforcement officers, to closely observe others’ appearances but also behaviours in order to look for incongruencies between dress and the assumed sex of the body underneath – a scrutinisation practice that particularly targeted (and continues...
to target) queer, transgender and gender non-normative people. Alok Vaid Menon, whose activism in the ‘#DegenderFashion’ movement has done much to highlight the need for change in the fashion industry, has commented that, though we should celebrate Styles’s cover as a step in the right direction, we must continue ‘insisting on a more expansive form of freedom’ in lifting up a wider range of gender expressions presented by, with and beyond clothing.

The outfit one chooses to wear, before one even puts it on, carries with it associations that reflect assumed identities. These associations, however, refract differently off different bodies, and create an interplay of identity for the wearer. The Vogue photoshoot might in its own way be moving us towards a world of degendered fashion, but we cannot pretend there is no relationship between the clothing and the (assumed) body of the wearer: the image of Harry Styles in a dress, for example, draws different connotations to the image of his sister, Gemma Styles, in a dress in the same photoshoot.

This forum brings together a range of articles considering the relationship between dress and gender in different historical periods, from Republican Rome to post-war Australia. By placing these articles together, we provide an opportunity to interrogate the relationship clothing has to the body it is on, with respect to conforming to, dissenting from and generally performing gender. More than simply coverings for the body, clothing is citational: it exists within a matrix of other visual markers, displayed by others also operating within that identity, past and present. When we consider how that citationality is drawn in the different contexts that are presented by these articles, we are able to think about how clothing is gendered in a wider historical perspective.

Harry and Gemma Styles may have highlighted the different associations carried by people of different genders wearing the same clothing, but this is nothing new. My second epigraph above takes us to the city of Rome in the first century CE. Martial wrote a range of humorous epigrams, aimed at satirising those in the city around him. The joke of this particular epigram rests on a number of complex assumptions with respect to clothing and its relationship to gendered roles and activities in early Imperial Rome. The unnamed addressee is gifting clothing to a woman identified only as a ‘famous adulteress’, but the poet suggests a more appropriate gift would be a toga. The dark reds and purples of the original gifts evoke a richness and perhaps even an air of authority; purple was an expensive dye to procure and as such carried lofty and even imperial associations. It is perhaps also interesting to note that, as will be seeing in Abigail Gomulkiewicz’s article in this forum, purple continues to hold these connotations beyond the ancient Mediterranean and was the monarch’s prerogative in the English Tudor court. The woman of Martial’s poem, then, was clearly of a high status (regardless of any extramarital infamy she has otherwise attained) and a modern reader might at first line this up with the status of the toga. The picture, however, is complicated by gender: for a man, to wear a toga was a quintessential representation of his Roman civic status, but around 50 years before Martial was born, the Emperor Augustus had made the toga a required outfit for a woman convicted of adultery. The gift of a toga, then, would inscribe for this woman her adultery as her only identity marker – in fact much like Martial’s language in this poem.

Regardless of whether this was an enforced uniform for adulteresses or not, it remains the case that it was a symbolic indication of the wearer’s moral status.
again highlights for us how dress is always more than merely a covering or accessory to one’s body. The clothing one chooses (or indeed, the clothing chosen for one, by a suitor or by law) is a visual language overlaid on the body that displays and reinforces expectations and formations of identity. Similarly, wider adornments such as hair, jewellery and even tattoos participate in the dialogue between self-presentation and social visibility, telling those around us who we are. This is at the heart of the articles in this forum, but we must remember that the cases under discussion do not exist within a vacuum, and the citationality of clothing is, to an extent, a conscious notion. People are, for the most part, aware of the visual language spoken by their outfits.

This brings us to my third epigraph for this introduction, in which Virginie Despentes reflects on beginning a career in sex work in late-twentieth-century Paris. She comments how her dress style moved from an androgynous, even masculine aesthetic, to one of hyperfemininity, and the bemusement she felt upon seeing a reflection she did not initially see as herself when she was dressed as a sex worker. The presentation, however, quickly became more than skin deep, and she notes that even the traits she had previously considered masculine, such as confidence and quick walking, became marked in herself as feminine. Her ‘dressing as’ became ‘being’, even if it was only for as long as the outfit was worn. Furthermore, Despentes wryly comments that ‘almost everyone is fascinated by a woman who chooses to dress like a whore’. This observation highlights the interrelationship between dress and recognition, much like we have already seen with Martial’s adulteress, but also serves to complicate the line between clothing and identity. Dressed in this way, Despentes was earning money as a sex worker, yet it is the dress and presentation on which her own description (and the fascination of ‘almost everyone’) centres.

Despentes’s relationship to the dress choices, however, quickly moved into being a fact of her job. Commenting on the working hours and conditions, she writes that ‘obviously, you need to count the times spent getting ready, waxing, dyeing, doing your nails, buying clothes, make-up, the cost of stockings, lingerie and latex outfits’. The hyperfemininity she found in the look was clearly more than womanhood and, importantly, located more in dress and presentation than it was in the body. But further, it was an economic consideration: both the time and money must be spent in ‘becoming’ that presentation of the hyperfeminine. This is a further aspect that sits behind my epigraphs here and the articles in this forum. In his pursuit of cross-gender play, Styles did not aim for utilitarian androgynous outfits, but rather designer wear; similarly, Martial’s adulteress seemed to expect gifts dyed in expensive colours. Fabrics, colours, skills and, importantly, desirability all factor into the cost of fashions, a necessary price for the participation in the identity formation discussed here and throughout this forum.

Overall, dress is a visual marker for identity, but, in some ways, we must also recognise that how one dresses (or is dressed) works within the framework of producing that identity, revealing the person the wearer wants to be seen as, and to be known as. Defending her notion of the citationality of gender performativity, Judith Butler once cautioned against imagining a scenario where each morning, after waking, a person ‘perused the closet or some more open space for the gender of choice, donned that gender for the day, and then restored the garment to its place each night’. Gender, rather, precedes any capability of perusing or donning. But as much as we ought not
to understand gender as simply garments, it is equally true that we ought not to under-
stand dress as simply garments. Dress, or at least the clothing norms of a given social 
setting, also holds within itself markers of identity (not least gender) that precede pe-
rusal or donning. To take the toga as our example once again: for the woman of early 
Imperial Rome who puts it on, her status (real or assumed by observers) as an adulter-
ess is conferred by the garment more readily than any statement detailing with whom 
she has had sex and under what conditions. Furthermore, the gendered status is made 
more apparent by the status (real or assumed) conferred to a man wearing the same 
toga. This highlights the way in which the person’s gender, following Butler, precedes 
their donning of the toga but also how the toga ‘reveals’ that gender underneath.15

Like Harry Styles, Martial’s unnamed yet famous adulteress and Despentes, the 
articles in this forum stand at the intersections of thinking about dress and gender 
history. They take diverse directions, considering the topic from a range of perspectives, 
but together they bring out the relationship between the body and its adornment, under 
the gaze of gender. The articles’s chronological arrangement is not intended to suggest 
a linear development, but rather to highlight the connections forwards and backwards 
between dress and gender.

In the first article in this forum, ‘Don’t be a drag, just be a priest: The clothing and 
identity of the galli of Cybele in the Roman Republic and Empire’, Chris Mowat uses 
recent considerations of drag and cross-dressing to think about how clothing can be 
used to create incongruity and ambiguity in respect of gender identity and the body. 
Applying this understanding to the ancient world, Mowat focuses their discussion on 
a priesthood known as the galli. Initiation to the galli required self-castration, after 
which they wore feminine clothing and accessories. Mowat argues that bringing these 
aspects of body and (re)presentation together created an opportunity for the galli to 
reposition their identity as beyond any binary gender normativity in Rome and the 
wider ancient Mediterranean. The idea of someone wearing clothing that does not line 
up with their perceived body or identity is not an unknown idea at Rome (indeed, 
in this introduction we have already touched on Martial’s adulteress wearing a toga). 
However, with their non-normative bodies, the galli present a unique sight in many 
respects. Whereas we might otherwise consider stories of drag and cross-dressing in 
Roman society as following a theme of disguise or deception – the attempt to con-
vince a viewer that one is of the opposite gender – the galli instead are showcasing 
an identity that plays with those norms. As we saw with Harry Styles modelling a 
fashion look drawn from both sides of the gender binary, the idea is to expose and 
perhaps even undermine dress’ role in how we are viewed, revelling in the incongruity 
of expectations.

Dress, and the relationship between what one wears and how one is perceived, 
importantly goes beyond clothing to encompass presentation choices such as hair, as 
Stefan Hanß reminds us in ‘Face-work: Making hair matter in sixteenth-century Cen-
tral Europe’. This time, it is masculinity that is the goal of the visual cues, particularly 
through the displaying of beards and facial hair. Hanß draws on the concept of face-
work to bring out the importance of the beard in early modern portraiture, and how 
it could be used to attribute a range of characteristics to the wearer, from virility and 
sexual potency to humanism and religiosity. When his masculinity was criticised dur-
ing Reformation debates in the sixteenth century, Duke Georg of Saxony’s response
was not just to grow a beard, but to circulate mass portraiture of himself wearing one. Hanß shows how George the Bearded, as he became known, utilised this imagery to both express grief over his wife’s death but also signal his bodily balance and integrity. Though hair might be something that naturally grows on bodies, this use of face-work reminds us that the cultivation of hair on the face (as much as hair over the whole body) is implicitly gendered, and it takes both time and resource to craft one’s look, in much the same way as Despentes’s construction of hyperfemininity. But, in the world of portraiture, there is a further element of time and resource in the hand of the artist. The artist had to be skilled in mixing the right dyes to effectively represent the colours and strokes of hair, facial and otherwise, and so for the sitter wanting to show off his face-work, this was an extra level within the expenditure. George the Bearded’s campaign, therefore, demonstrates more than just how his face looked but also how much time, money and (face-)work was put into what others would perceive.

Looking at the choices made in putting together outfits from a different perspective, our next article draws out the relationship between dress and gender through modes of gift giving to the English Queen Elizabeth I. In ‘The gender dynamics of dress gifts for Elizabethan men at the court of Elizabeth I’, Gomulkiewicz analyses modes of giving to consider how men and women of different statuses gifted clothing, jewellery and accessories to their queen. The New Year’s Gift Rolls record annual offerings to the monarch, as well as data on the status of the giver. Thus, we see that both elite and non-elite men gifted dress and accessories to pay respect and honour to the queen. The materiality of the gifts had specific values – financial, but also symbolic – that were important for the giver to know in order to navigate a successful interaction. We might think of the giver of Martial’s epigram, who, presumably, is equally trying to navigate a social interaction (perhaps even courtship) through financial as well as symbolic gifts of scarlet and violet dresses, despite the poet’s dismissiveness of her broader activities. Gift-giving as an interaction was not one-sided, however, and as Gomulkiewicz reminds us, gift exchange carried the expectation of a return, be it material (such as land) or political (such a favour). We are able to see how men of different stations placed and presented themselves through the gifts, but also how they were able to utilise their networks, for example seeking advice from those close to the queen, to present themselves as favourably as possible. Overall, Gomulkiewicz makes clear how convention, rank, personal networking and political information intersected with gender to produce implications (though not necessarily restrictions) on what both men and women of the English Court could, should and did offer to their Queen.

As the economic circumstances of givers had direct implications in the gifts they gave, so too do they for individual wearers and the identity(ies) they displayed. Taking the idea that dress is imbued with national and class-based presuppositions as her starting point for ‘Clothing economy and clothing culture: The farm wardrobe in a gendered perspective, nineteenth century Sweden’, Marie Ulväng turns to farmers’ clothing in Sweden during industrialisation to consider the nuances of status, dress and gender. Primarily seeing clothes not as modes of dress but as goods and possessions, she combines macro and micro approaches to demonstrate clothing’s place within household budgets before and after Swedish industrialisation in the second half of the nineteenth century. Probate records from the parish of Lillhärdal provide an archive from which to analyse the changes over time. Although they only provide a static
image of end-of-life material without recording when and where the items were acquired, they provide a unique window into complete men’s and women’s wardrobes. As such, they allow us a unique perspective into the consumption of clothing. The focus on the economic aspect of clothing, as we saw with Despentes, can recentre clothing in terms of the materiality of gender, particularly one in which men and women partook (and continue to partake) through purchase and use. Budgets were of course elastic, as people’s circumstances changed throughout their lifetime, but also as people’s lifecycles affected what they bought, made or needed. What Ulväng makes clear, however, is that the identity that was demonstrated by dress remained a part of these needs, and for example even after industrialisation, manufactured fabrics remained necessary for communicating affiliation to farming culture and class. Over this period, then, in which Sweden underwent the social and cultural changes attached to industrialisation, fashion – but more specifically the consumption of clothing and accessories by men and women – similarly underwent social, cultural and practical changes.

Yet, dress does more than reflect social identity, and it is possible to see fashion complicit in marking and driving societal change, as is seen in the last article of this forum, ‘Relaxed bodies and comfortable clothes: Reframing masculinity in post-war Australia’. Lorinda Cramer shows how, in the years immediately after the Second World War, Australian menswear had to respond to changing needs, in a symbolic movement away from the austere military uniforms that represented wartime but also in the very real changes to men’s bodies. Frontline soldiers as well as ex-prisoners of war found they could not, as much as did not want to, return to their pre-war closets. Cramer provides a close reading of the trends set in two men’s magazines, Men and Tailor and Men’s Wear, to understand how they framed idealised bodies, as we see how once again clothing reveals as much as covers the body of the wearer. The symbolic shift is also seen in the language of comfort, making a stark contrast to wartime needs and thus signalling a societal break from the austerity and darkness of that period. There is a strong link that we can draw here in thinking about Harry Styles’s Vogue cover shoot; though we might not consider Styles to be centring comfort in his style, nor an idealised menswear look, we can certainly see how fashion magazines, and the fashion industry more broadly, position themselves as drivers of change, whether in degendering or in recomforting. But Cramer further shows how opinions and responses to these changes are not monolithic, and commentators from both within the industry and beyond responded with a variety of opinions on the trend towards informality. Overall, we can see that these magazines, and the industry they represent, provide nuance to considerations of the relationship between gender, clothing and social context.

Notes
1. Quoted in Hamish Bowles, ‘Playtime with Harry Styles’ Vogue (Dec 2020), https://www.vogue.com/article/harry-styles-cover-december-2020.
2. Martial, Ep. 2.39 (all translations, unless otherwise noted, are my own): coccina famosae donas et ianthina moechae: / uix dare quae meruit munera? mitte togam.
3. Virginie Despentes, King Kong Theory, tr. Frank Wynne (London: Fitzcarraldo, 2020), p. 60.
4. These specifics taken from a San Francisco ordinance of 1863, quoted in Susan Stryker, Transgender History: The Roots of Today’s Revolution (rev. edn: New York: Seal Press, 2017), p. 47.
5. See Clare Sears, Arresting Dress: Cross-Dressing, Law, and Fascination in Nineteenth-Century San Francisco (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2015), especially pp. 78–96, for a discussion of ideas.
about looking for and looking at cross-dressing practices; see also Stryker, Transgender History, pp. 45–51, for a contextualisation of the laws in the development of a North American transgender movement for social change, and C. Riley Snorton, Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), especially pp. 55–97, for the relationship between transgender, cross-dressing, race and slavery in nineteenth-century North America.

6. Alok Vaid Menon, ‘#DegenderFashion: Harry Styles on the Cover of Vogue’ (2020), https://www.alokvmenon.com/blog/2020/11/13/degenderfashion-harry-styles-on-the-cover-of-vogue.

7. It is perhaps important to note too that the incongruency that has been used to disallow particularly transgender women their identity is also used by Styles to reassert his own cisgender masculinity, reinventing even while subverting the ‘man in a dress’ trope.

8. For the idea of fashion as a dialectic image, and a product of the past and present in conversation, see Eun Jung Kang, ‘The Dialectic Image: The Redemption of Fashion’, Fashion Theory 18 (2014), pp. 341–59.

9. For the relationship between the colour purple and authority in the ancient Mediterranean, see Chris Mowat, Engendering the Future: Divination and the Construction of Gender in the Late Roman Republic (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 2021), pp. 122–3.

10. For the toga as a cultural symbol representing Romanness (for men, at least), see Caroline Vout, ‘The Myth of the Toga: Understanding the History of Roman Dress’, Greece & Rome 43 (1996), pp. 204–20, especially pp. 213–7.

11. The extent to which this was prescriptive, in respect of either prostitutes or adulteresses, is unclear. Kelly Olson, ‘Matrona and Whore: The Clothing of Women in Roman Antiquity’, Fashion Theory 6 (2002), pp. 387–420, argues that it was not a legal compulsion as much as metonymy, though Thomas McGinn, ‘Prostitution: Controversies and New Approaches’, in Thomas K. Hubbard (ed.), A Companion to Greek and Roman Sexualities (London: Blackwell, 2014), pp. 83–101, especially 91–7, critiques this position.

12. Despentes, King Kong Theory, p. 60.

13. Despentes, King Kong Theory, p. 62.

14. Judith Butler, Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of ‘Sex’ (1993; repr. London: Routledge, 2011), p. ix.

15. As an aside, we might also use the toga to remind ourselves that the conferred status is always culture specific: if Virginie Despentes were to have worn a toga in late-twentieth-century Paris, it would be unlikely to give the impression of her being either an adulteress or a senator!

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