WOMEN IN SOCIETY

A Feminist List edited by

Jo Campling

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The 1970s and 1980s have seen an explosion of publishing by, about and for women. This new list is designed to make a particular contribution to this process by commissioning and publishing books which consolidate and advance feminist research and debate in key areas in a form suitable for students, academics and researchers but also accessible to a broader general readership.

As far as possible books will adopt an international perspective incorporating comparative material from a range of countries where this is illuminating. Above all they will be interdisciplinary, aiming to put women's studies and feminist discussion firmly on the agenda in subject-areas as disparate as law, physical education, art and social policy.

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 Annie Woodhouse **Fantastic Women: sex, gender and transvestism**

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 Janet Wolff **The Art of Women**

Fantastic Women

Sex, Gender and Transvestism

Annie Woodhouse

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MACMILLAN

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For my parents

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ANNIE WOODHOUSE

Introduction

It's not often a book about men appears in a feminist series; still less so a book about men who spend their leisure time pretending to be women. Female impersonation has a long history and a wide currency; it confronts us frequently in the form of drag shows, fancy-dress parties and television comedy in the interests of entertainment and fun. But the notion that someone might take cross-dressing seriously and indulge in it privately and pleasurably provokes quite different reactions, more along the lines of the 'shock-horror' syndrome. But for every drag artist in the pubs and clubs there are many more men who like to dress as women, not for the entertainment of others, but for their own satisfaction. They are transvestites – men who derive pleasure, often sexual, always sensual, from creating a feminine appearance by putting on women's underwear, clothes, shoes, make-up and wig.

What does a fully clothed man look like? How would you describe him? Wearing trousers, shirt, a tie? But so do women. Short hair and no make-up? This is equally applicable to lots of women. It is a difficult question to answer, yet to all practical intents and purposes we 'know' what a man looks like. We expect men to dress to 'look like' men and women to 'look like' women. Thus to enter a room ostensibly full of women and to find that they are in fact men dressed and made up to resemble women is, at the very least, surprising. Imagine the effect of conversing with someone who looks and sounds female, who talks about her job as a receptionist in an all-female office, only to discover that 'she' is a 'he'. The revelation that a person's gender appearance is not a direct reflection of their biological sex is unexpected and can be disturbing. Sex, gender and appearance form a sort of trinity which runs deep in our social and psychological expectations of how our lives should be.

Quite simply, transvestism means cross-dressing – from the Latin

'trans' cross, 'vestire' to dress. It is not a single, unified process which is easily identified and categorised into convenient slots. To state simply that a transvestite is a person who cross-dresses is, in itself, insufficient, as this fails to identify the aspects which specifically characterise the transvestite. Not all cross-dressers are transvestites. There are drag queens, professional female impersonators, transsexuals and cross-dressed prostitutes, but the transvestite cross-dresses not for money, entertainment, politics, nor because he is convinced that he really is a woman. He does it from perceived need, often expressed as compulsion, and because he enjoys it. Transvestism represents a wholesale transgression of the 'rules' of gender in a manner which is both direct and extraordinary. It is socially proscribed and often controlled by legal sanction.

The ways in which we cling so tenaciously to 'appropriate' sex/gender linkages have been progressively clarified through the growth and influence of feminist politics and writing. The ways in which ideals of feminine beauty are constructed and maintained to coincide with men's interests have been well documented. What is less clear, though, is why some men should wish to take on these ideals of feminine beauty themselves to the extent of wanting to look like women and be accepted as such. Transvestite behaviour underlines an assumption which lies at the base of social interaction: namely that people who look like men are biologically male and people who look like women are undoubtedly female. More to the point, most people never even think about the assumption that men will *not* dress in women's clothes.

The transvestite is problematic because he dares to assume both genders. Biologically he is male and, for the most part, he will assume an 'appropriate' appearance, he will look masculine. This stands him apart from the transsexual who is convinced that he (or less frequently, she) is of the wrong sex and that the only way to rectify this imbalance is through surgery which will reassign him to the 'correct' sex. Transvestites are men. It is often argued, especially by transvestites themselves, that women do not experience a need to cross-dress because they can more or less dress to please themselves anyway. But transvestism includes a strong predilection for sexy, feminine underwear which sometimes includes wearing it under normal masculine attire, and it would seem that this fetishistic element is absent from the ways in which women learn to view sexuality. When a woman 'cross-dresses', say

by wearing a man's-style suit, she is not trying to be a man, nor does she expect to be taken for one. She is simply following a trend. When the transvestite cross-dresses he wants to be convincing, to 'pass' in public as a woman. Affecting an extreme masculine appearance can denote a woman's sexual preference; in contrast, the transvestite is usually heterosexual, often married.

But why should a man want to appear as a woman? Why should he wish to masquerade as a member of the second sex, a group dominated and oppressed by men? In the act of cross-dressing the transvestite momentarily upsets the primacy attributed to masculine appearance, but does this undermine gender divisions? Indeed, is the transvestite a proactive feminist? To date, the bulk of research into transvestism has been contained within the closed circuit of medical and psychiatric specialist journals. It focuses on transvestism in a way that places it squarely within the arena of sexual deviance, where it becomes part of the spectrum of psychosexual disorders requiring treatment, cure or prevention. The individuals featured in the case studies may well be atypical of transvestites in general; as a rule they do not come to medical or psychiatric attention unless they are disturbed or under some kind of family or legal pressure to seek it.

Behaviourist psychologists rely on electric shocks and nausea-inducing drugs; psychoanalysts talk about 'phallic women' and weak fathers; liberals call for tolerance and social reform. In this respect *Fantastic Women* is quite different, presenting the first feminist study of transvestites in Britain today. It is not an apologia for the much maligned transvestite; rather it concerns itself with the particular angles that transvestism can offer to the study of gender as a social construction. In other words, this study goes beyond the traditional individualising approach which limits itself to asking 'Why do they do it?' and moves on to a focus based on sexual politics and the power imbalances contained in the social construction of gender.

Studies of gender roles are usually concerned with women, with a much smaller area of research devoted to examining the male gender role, but transvestism presents a peculiar anomaly: the biological male who knows and accepts that he is male and yet experiences a need to dress in women's clothing. To consider transvestism in relation to gender divisions allows us to see gender as a reflection of power and the lack of power.

Within this feminist framework two areas are examined which

have received little or no attention in sociological research. First, although it has already been demonstrated that there is a relationship between clothing symbolism and sexual politics (Wilson, 1985), the continuing primacy of masculinity in western society suggests that the study of gender divisions and sexual politics must include a sociology of appearance. In transvestism especially, appearance becomes the primary target, the goal being the perfection of a feminine guise. In this sense the apparent is divorced from the real, which in turn raises issues concerning the interlinking not only of sex and gender, but of sex, gender and gender appearance. It is assumed that the external appearance indicates not only biological sex, but also a person's inward gender identity. Transvestism upsets this assumption.

Second, in this study the views of some women married to transvestites are heard. Traditionally transvestism has been approached from the standpoint of the practitioners, the clinicians, or both. The role of women as wives of these men has remained largely invisible, receiving somewhat cursory treatment in two American studies (Feinbloom, 1976; Talamini, 1982). In Britain their perspective has been totally ignored (see Woodhouse, 1985).

Fieldwork in clubs, bars and private homes provided opportunities to meet a broad spectrum of men who like to dress up as women. Of course, it could be argued that the transvestites depicted here are equally as atypical as those in the various clinical case studies, but the point is that the transvestites featured here were largely members of TV/TS, an organisation and social club for transvestites and transsexuals. They were there because they wanted to be there and they were observed as transvestites interacting socially with other transvestites, not with 'experts'.

Fieldwork can often alter the researcher's original intentions and ideas, and this study is no exception. It started off as an investigation into the unwritten rules of gender demarcation with the purpose of presenting the case that transvestism is one way of breaking down the barriers. Meeting Eleanor, the wife of a transvestite (see Chapter 6) changed this. Suddenly transvestism wasn't simply about men transgressing the rules of gender in private; it involved marriages and conflict and sometimes suffering. Interviews with other wives underlined this. It's always said that there are two sides to every argument and the intention here is to present these two sides, but total neutrality is not possible and sides have to be taken.

In this respect this is not a study which is particularly sympathetic to transvestism. Of course, some transvestites will argue that a woman cannot possibly understand transvestism, but this can only be self-defeating, coming from those who want to become temporary 'women', supported by understanding wives.

Chapter 1 examines the relationship of sex and gender and the idea of sex as a non-problematic biological distinction. The vast majority of people regard biological sex unquestioningly, seeing it as something natural and fixed. Gender is the cultural identification of femininity and masculinity. It is both announced and recognised through various visual and vocal signals: hair, clothes, body shape and movement, gestures and facial expressions, voice and speech. Like sex, gender is thought of as fixed: that people are either masculine or feminine and that this is wholly determined by the shape of their genitals and the function of their reproductive organs. The common assumption is that sex and gender fit, that gender appearance is an accurate reflection of biological sex. These unwritten laws of 'fit' are encapsulated in the social expectations we have about clothing and appearance. Clothing forms part of a system of social signalling; it is used to indicate belonging, status, occasions and events along with personal and social identity. Above all, it is used to demarcate gender, so that although the symbols change with fashion the gender/sex message remains the same, namely that feminine appearance indicates female sex and masculine appearance male sex. Clothing is a badge of gender status, thus 'correct' gender appearance reaffirms our belief in the mutual exclusivity of masculine and feminine. Transvestism offers a means of examining these conventions of gender.

Chapter 2 considers the problems of definition: the confusion with drag, with sexual direction and expression and the overlap with transsexualism. Transvestism involves wearing feminine clothing, but it goes beyond simple fetishism and encompasses gender identity and sexual desires. Its mainly privatised nature precludes accurate estimates of its extent, but a total of 30 000 transvestites in Britain has been suggested. Transvestite groups tend to claim higher numbers. The transvestites represented here may or may not be typical of the total – there is no way of knowing. The research base TV/TS, a meeting-place for cross-gendered men, is introduced

along with members – the transvestites, transsexuals, the partners and the punters.

Academic convention requires that the researcher as a real and gendered human being disappears in the writing-up stage, and that 'the facts' are simply reported. Against such convention much of the section dealing with TV/TS is written in the first person, but with good reason. At the time of research it was unusual for a 'real' woman to visit the club, and almost unheard of if she wasn't partnering a transvestite. As far as I know, I am the first female sociologist to conduct such a study in Britain and undoubtedly my presence had an impact if only because of my sex. Although I was sometimes on the receiving end of unwelcome attention, I also had an advantage over a male researcher because the transvestites were keen to talk to me and ask advice about cosmetics and hairstyles, which paved the way for greater rapport. But above all else I was an outsider and I perceived the whole scene as such.

Chapter 3 explodes the myth of the typical transvestite and examines the diversity of transvestite lifestyles and ways of coping with a double life. Examples of differing experiences are related to age and the significance attributed to cross-dressing, from the leisure-time-only transvestite, to the full-time 'woman'.

Chapter 4 reviews the medico-psychiatric and psychoanalytical literature. The causes of transvestism have been attributed to a whole gamut of factors: biological, early childhood, oedipal conflicts and faulty socialisation. Medical models have proposed cures; psychoanalytical approaches suggest individual resolution; others call for prevention through correct upbringing. The ideas about what constitutes normality and abnormality are unspecified, thereby lending credence to traditional ideologies of gender and the notion of 'correct' gender role behaviour. On the basis of this failure to explain causes, it is argued that we may learn more from considering the social effects of transvestism and the responses to it.

Chapter 5 considers whether transvestism has a role to play in breaking down gender divisions. While some transvestites and transsexuals may argue that it does – and indeed Carol Riddell, a post-operative transsexual, makes a strong case for it as a weapon in the fight against patriarchy – feminist responses to it have tended to revolve around cultural feminism and an ensuing condemnation. Proponents of transvestism have promoted it as the means to psychic wholeness and a completion of the self; thus the possibility of an anti-sexist transvestism is raised. However, in turning to the

existing research we find that in the case of transvestism in marriage it is often the wives who are expected to shoulder the blame, while their transvestite husbands are considered to be the real victims; hence the necessity of investigating wives' experience.

Marriage to a transvestite can raise problems associated with sexuality, clothing fetishism, sexual demands, money, children. This has been intensified by the lack of support systems for women in such marriages. In Chapter 6 the experiences of five such wives are reported in detail in their own words, providing a strong contrast with the views of the 'experts' outlined in the previous chapter and also with the views of many of the transvestites themselves. In Chapter 7 the help available to wives is discussed: the few publications directed at women married to transvestites and a recently formed partners' support group at TV/TS.

Why then should transvestism matter? One of the difficulties here is that although the case for liberal tolerance can be made quite convincingly, unconditional acceptance of it would entail outright rejection of the experiences of the wives outlined in Chapter 6, and their need for support cannot be simply written off as a personal solution to a social problem. From a feminist standpoint, gender roles and gender identity raise issues of social control. Women are kept down and restricted through the patriarchal imposition of feminine ideals which is both the result of and a support for masculinity's retention of primary status in society. Such divisions stunt development and when young boys are taken to gender-identity clinics because they are failing to show the 'correct' gender behaviour we throw up our hands in horror.

But there are serious contradictions here for feminism. It is simply not enough to state that we must tolerate transvestites, all the while thinking, 'but I wouldn't want to live with one'. The fact of the matter is that a lot of women, feminists and non-feminists alike, want their man to *be* a man, and that most definitely does not include wearing dresses, high heels and make-up. Do we deny the validity of these feelings? It is concluded that the contradiction is more apparent than real. The claim for tolerance based on the assertion that transvestism blurs the edges of the gender divide is a false one. Transvestism is a form of fractured behaviour which compartmentalises masculinity and femininity; thus the possession of two wardrobes does not make for a more complete self, any more than it makes for greater sexual equality.