A Brief History of Crossdressing in Literature

Fashion has always existed philosophically in a liminal space, treated with contempt and thought of for its frivolity, and the identify politics it begs into question ignored, but the importance of dress has remained a critical part of culture. It wasn't until the 19th century that sociologists, writers and philosophers began to take it seriously. Stephan Mallarmé, Charles Baudelaire, and Georg Simmel began to look at fashion critically, examining the way it functions within society, as a means of communication to both men and women. Simmel notes that fashion exists both as a way in order to signify to others who you are and what groups you belong to, as well as to stake a visual representation as your own identity. Fashion is critical in its cultural context to express to others your class, profession, sex, age, the groups you belong to. This has remained to this day, with the alternative subcultures of the 20th century being a clear example of how differentiations in dress labels one with certain cultural connotations. The use of fashion in order to signify sex has been a pervasive part of its significance throughout a multitude of cultures and time periods. Different cultures have treated the act with a vastly different outlook. Many Native American, African and East Asian groups have had culturally significant figures who moved between sex freely, and were greatly venerated and an important part of their tradition. Many of the indigenous Native American tribes had "two-spirit" people, or gender non-conforming individuals who would dress as, or take the identity of the opposite or a third sex which was often displayed through clothes. The māhū of Tahitian and Hawaiian islands are another example of respected individuals within a native culture who adopted a gender nonconforming persona and was identified by dress.

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Western culture has notoriously had a more antagonistic relationship spurred on by patriarchal ideas of masculinity and religious fanaticism. Despite few individuals within Western Culture who had been celebrated or were notorious for their own crossdressing or gender nonconformity, the broader cultural feelings towards the act was widely looked down on.

Helioglaubus, debauched teenage emperor of the Roman Empire was known for their gender nonconformity, often wearing the clothes of a woman and requiring those around them to refer to them as Empress when in this guise, or dressed as a prostitute to visit brothels to engage in sexual relations with both men and women. There is a long list of women in Europe and the Americas who dressed as men in order to fight for their country in war. The most notable example is likely Joan of Arc, and despite being tried and burned at the stake at the time for her heresy, accused of blasphemy for the act of crossdressing and following demonic visions, later was venerated as a Saint within the Catholic Church. For centuries it was even widely believed and accepted that a woman crossdressed as a man and was ruling as the pope of the Church under the name of Pope Joan, though is now thought to have been a myth.

The Church's hypocrisy with crossdressing mirrors the path of western culture. Contemporary to the bible's writing and non-christian early western cultures had mixed views on crossdressing, with myths of Gods and Heroes often donning the dress of the opposite sex for various reasons. Thor crossdresses as a woman in the *Thrymskvitha* poems, and laments that the other gods would chide him for his unmanly appearance. Statius's *The Achilliad* has Achilles dress as a woman to hide out and to get close to the daughter of King Lycomedes. But as Western Civilisation became more

Christianised, the biblical contempt for crossdressing took hold. Deuteronomy 22:5 states that “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.” As Christianity spread, this cemented crossdressing within western consciousness as a sinful and perverted act. Other biblical and extra-biblical laws surrounding clothing and modesty furthered this divide between sex and dress.

Yet the idea of what crossdressing could be remained within the thoughts of the people, and writers used the freedom provided by fiction in order to express ideas of what crossdressing could be and used it as a plot device to both cement and reject the prevailing ideas of culture at the time.

The use of crossdressing was something thought of or used in a comedic way. But comedic use of transgressive acts bring the ideas into cultural consciousness. Shakespeare is probably the most well known example of comedic use of crossdressing in his work, with four different titles distinctly addressing crossdressing, *The Merchant of Venice, As You Like It, Cymbeline* and *Twelfth Night*. This is separate from the Travesti, or men preforming the roles of women for the stage, which began with Grecian theatre as women began to lose agency in a growing patriarchal society. The use of crossdressing for the stage continued from adaptations of earlier stories featuring the act of crossdressing. *The Achillied* continued to be an important myth and following continuous references and retellings in literature, including in Dante’s *Divine Comedy* and was later adapted by Tirso de Molina as *El Aquiles* for the stage. Ludovico Ariosto’s epic poem *Orlando Furioso* had a great deal of influence on the representation of crossdressing within literature and theatre. It was adapted many

times for both the stage and opera and as new literary retellings, directly influencing Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, Shakespeare and *Orlando* by Virginia Woolf. Many of these previous examples use crossdressing in order to allow one sex to enter a forbidden space of the other sex, whether for sexual prospects, comedy, love or honour. This remained an important part and use of the trope, continuing into the late 20th century, with works like *L'Astrée*, *Don Juan*, *La Femme Abbé, The Return of the King*. This use of crossdressing showcases the arbitrary distinction between genders. The relatively easy ability of the character to assume the an identity within the sacred and closed off realms of their opposite sex, showcases the lack of distinction between women and men in mind and ability, but only in nakedness. In *Don Juan*, Juan is noted by the members of the harem to have some slightly masculine mannerisms and height, but this is immediately dismissed. The appearance and dress of Juan is simply all that matters in conveying him as a woman to the others. At the same time, Juan feels discomfort at the prospect of being forced to dress in woman's garb. Regardless of the sex of the clothing, one's own identity is how clothing is used to communicate. The complex distinction between the interior nature of how clothing functions and how it exists as a form of broader cultural communication conveys the complex nature of how clothing works for Simmel. There is a dualistic desire to both be accepted as part of the cultural group and to separately identify yourself as distinct and promote your own identity.

Contrary to the examples of Thor and Juan's feelings of discomfort at having to dress in clothing opposite to their own gender, the eponymous character in the 13th century novel, Le Roman de Silence, is raised as a man despite having been born a female.

Upon learning that they are really a woman, and the ensuing existential crisis spurred on between nature and nurture, they find their true self represented in male dress, but in the end fall to the norms of the time and changes their name to a feminised version and assumes a female identity. The work immediately questions the nature of gendered dress and shows how it is something instilled by society, despite the ending. Silence ties her identity to her dress rather than the prevailing cultural idea of it being tied to biological sex. If as de Beauvoir said, “one is not born but rather becomes a woman” can it be made any more clear than here in this 13th century fiction of a woman raised as a man. Even though the poem has “Nature” win a the end, she still is only succumbing to what she believes are the norms of the time, how she was raised to interpret the dress and behaviour of how women show be, rather than any innate biological function of woman. Dress, and specifically gendered dress only exists as a reflection of the time, with the Great Male Renunciation being illustrative of how gendered clothing changes. The 18th century saw a swap in how male fashion disavowed bright colours, patterns and the ornate. Instead, as detailed by the Dandyism and Baudelaire in *Le Paintre de la Vie Moderne*, the fashion for men became linked only to tailoring. What was only a century before considered male dress quickly became only linked to female fashions.

The use of crossdressing remained an important way for authors to question and rebel against broader society and its restrictions. *Consuelo* by George Sand was a rejection of female gender roles mirroring her own life and adoption of a male identity. *La Femme Abbé,* written surrounding the French Revolution by Sylvain Maréchal was a part of his extensive critique of religion and atheistic writings. His use of sexual comedy

surrounding the clergy and the ability for Agathe to entwine herself within the Church was illustrative of his different writings and political philosophy dictating antitheistic positions and those calling for equality between the sexes and equal education. This idea of using crossdressing for political and social commentary was continued by Rachilde in *Monsieur Venus*, wherein the characters engage in sexual play where they break the mould of contemporary aristocratic French society by adopting the roles and dress of the opposite gender. The aristocratic Raoul becomes the male in the relationship, while Jacques, the flower maker, adopts the role as her lover and wife. The work uses this sexualised account of crossdressing and gender nonconformity to question the aristocratic norms of the time and the gender roles within them. Within the final chapter of the story, after Jacques is killed, Raoul has his body embalmed and mechanised and engages in necrophilic acts with his corpse, dressing him each night either as a man or as a woman. Beyond the bounds of society, freed from the constraints provided, Jacques as a woman becomes her tool and her toy. Raoul is allowed complete freedom in a state of nature to engage in her actions outside of societal norms.

The fetishisation and sexualisation of crossdressing is borrowed from the Marquis de Sade in his orgiastic opus *The 120 Days of Sodom,* the libertine characters are told a story by one of the old prostitutes they solicited about a man who is only willing to have sex with a boy dressed in female clothes. Here de Sade makes a seeming distinction between sex and gender. The man uses the penis and the anus of this prostituted boy for his sexual gratification, and is unwilling to engage in any form of sex with a woman. He clearly acknowledges the person before him as a biological man, yet

uses clothing to disguise this. It is unclear from the story whether this is so that he feels still comfortable having sex with another man, and whether his flagellation is punishment for his actions, or a use of a woman's dress to pacify and subjugate the boy, or whether it is a liberation from distinct gender. The four libertines continue the conversation about this act, by claiming that sex with a man is better than that of with a female, but completely ignore the conversation of the clothing donned by the prostituted boy.

This varied use of how crossdressing functioned in western literature, but its pervasiveness as a trope mirrors society's move away from the religious chokehold on culture as well as an explanation of how fashion functions as a cultural identifier. The very fact that crossdressing has existed as a literary theme since virtually the beginning of western literature and has been a part of what is considered many of the greatest works within the literary canon and continued into gain even more common use into the 20th century only serves to solidify how crossdressing and gender nonconformity is an important byproduct of cultural fashion and repression of it will still find those who break free from its constraints. The contemporary attacks on gender nonconformity in dress, including the right wing's attacks on drag, ignore the basis of historical fact of how the very pieces of art that our culture is built on, that has shaped our very language, beliefs and cultural touchstones are themselves acts of rebellion against patriarchal society and against a single line in a religious text which has led to innumerable deaths and persecution.