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GETTING DRESSED OR WHY FEMINISTS SHOULD TAKE THIS QUESTION SERIOUSLY

Abstract

The article deals with demands made upon women about their appearance in the 21st century, comments made by, and about, women and the ways in which they dress. That is the suggestion that there is a greater plurality about dress in the contemporary world than it was in the world of our grandmothers. But in place of the former strictures there are others: demands about youth and youthfulness, of forms of self association either for or against class and racialised others, of representing a human, dressed, version, of the “new”. All represent aspirations for identifying – or not – the self through dress. The question of who do we want to look like is one that is unavoidable.

KEYWORDS

feminism, equality, fashion, aestheticism

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feminizm, równość, moda, estetyzm

The question of “what to wear” is one that confronts the majority of the people on the planet every morning. For many millions that decision is shaped by poverty and scarcity in that there is simply no choice of what to wear: the amount of clothing owned is minimal. But for many others, certainly the population of the global North, there is that familiar issue of how we will dress. Deciding how to do this is everywhere shaped by material and social circumstances: we may have to wear a uniform, we may have little money to spend on clothes, but at some point in our lives we all have faced that question of exactly how we are going to appear in public. It is a general issue but one on which feminists have been singularly silent despite the amount of attention that has been given to questions about women’s bodies, cosmetics, and cosmetic surgery. The harm that social mores can do to individual women in shaping such conditions as anorexia or bulimia has been richly recorded but the more commonplace issue of what-to-wear, and why-to-wear-it, demands more attention. We know that the issue of the display of women’s bodies has long been one of the great causes of feminism. In 2020 the film *Misbehaviour* re-created the events of the 1970 Miss World pageant in London when feminists challenged the display of women and the values and judgments attached to their appearance. In that pageant women competing for the title of Miss World had to appear in swimsuits as well as formal dress. That dichotomy was in many ways a reflection of the ways in which the 20th century in much of the global North had seen the gradual, but determined, increase in the extent to which the female body could be publicly displayed whilst at the same time maintaining expectations of female modesty in more traditional settings. At the start of the 20th century no respectable woman would have thought of appearing in a scanty swimming costume, by 2021 this has become entirely acceptable to the majority of the population of the global North, even as the context of beauty pageants has lost much of its legitimacy. In this we can see that the public gaze and judgement of the physical body of women have become intensely problematic, but how we dress that body arouses less intense political discussion. The interest in that discussion differs from country to country as do national traditions, such as the famous *passeggiata* of Italy, in which a central theme of the evening urban stroll is to display dress. The comments that follow in this essay are largely about the context of the United Kingdom, not a place which has had a distinguished history in the annals of high fashion but is nevertheless a place with an energetic consumer market (that “high street” of financial journalism) around dress.

But dress, undress, how we dress, who we dress for remain as contentious as ever. The argument of this paper is that there is no hiding from the complexities of dress: we have to “get dressed” in order to take part in the social world and that same social world is one about which feminism has always had a great deal to say. But whilst feminism has been engaged with the social and political world since its earliest history, it has had relatively little to say about dress, and fashion, until recently. In this, feminism has had something of a masculinist stance:

that getting dressed is somehow not worth discussion. Thus dress and fashion have often been assumed, both by women and men, to be something inherently frivolous and superficial. “Real” men do not worry about their clothes and those same “real” men assume that one of the characteristics of women is that they are overconcerned with the intrinsically trivial matter of dress and appearance. There has been, throughout the 20th century, a literature which records and comments on the dress of women and matters of style, but the social relations of dress, of who dresses, in what and why, have received relatively little attention¹.

For various reasons, that view is now more complex than it once was. Categories of male and female, feminine and masculine have become publicly visible as more diffuse than they once were. At the same time the considerable part that men play in all forms of fashion, pre-dominantly its design and its production, is recognised. The growing awareness of ecological politics and the impact that the production of “fashion” has on both the natural world and on the lives of the people working in the factories that produce it have resulted in the demonisation of “fast” fashion and its social and environmental consequences. On this agenda, two issues are particularly important: first, that of the exploitative possibilities of the making of dress and fashion, and second, the capacity for waste implicit in the idea of fashion: this year’s fashion will not be that of next year. We know that the majority of the people involved in the production of clothing, the people on the production lines of the clothing factories, are largely women. Men may run and supervise those factories but it is women who are the machinists, who sew the hems and make the button-holes. Those same women are badly paid and often work in appalling physical conditions: quite how bad was revealed to the world in the devastating collapse of the Rana Plaza garment factory in Dhaka, Bangladesh, in 2013, where 1, 134 people died. That fire brought to much greater public attention the realisation that the women who work in the sweat shop garment factories of various parts of the world are seldom, if ever, the women who are buying the clothes that are produced in these places. The buyers are the various markets in the global North. These buyers, probably the majority of those reading this and the author of this essay, are part of these markets and we all select and make endless decisions about what we should wear.

It is at this point that our perceptions of ourselves, and as feminists, comes into play. In the early days of the late 20th century feminism much was made, by both critics and sympathisers with feminism, about the ways in which feminists supposedly dressed. The critics of feminism constructed entirely apocryphal “bra burning” feminists, accusing them of ugly clothes, and the refusal of anything that those critics saw as appropriate for women. Feminists, on the other hand, demanded freedom for women to choose their own ways of dressing, in this view

¹ C.W. Cunnington, *Why women wear clothes*, London 1941; I. Parkins, E. Sheehan (eds.) *Cultures of femininity in modern fashion*, Durham, New Hampshire 2011.

following older traditions where women had fought to wear trousers, use make-up, and decide for themselves what they would wear. Getting dressed has always been politicised, the 1970s did not invent the politics of dressing, but it became, and has remained, an area of debate.

We need to emphasise that how women dress has always been a subject of controversy and social control. The great women novelists of the UK in the 19th century (the Bronte sisters, Elizabeth Gaskell, George Eliot) were all uniformly enthusiastic about the importance of “neatness” and “modesty” in the dress of women. The visual sign of a woman without the “right” moral qualities was an over-developed engagement with dress. On the other side of the Atlantic, and in the same generation, the eldest March sister (Meg) in Alcott’s *Little women* was led astray by rich friends and persuaded into rich and elaborate clothing². We are invited to agree with the fictional male characters of that novel that Meg has been “ruined” by the ostentation of her borrowed finery. What is at work here is that powerful, trans-generational assumption about the dress of women: that it can be a sign of moral virtue. To accept elaborate dress can be read, in much of this 19th century fiction, as a signifier of implicit narcissism and possibilities of sexual and moral ambiguity. When Charlotte Bronte’s character Jane Eyre in the novel of the same name rejects the expensive clothes that the wealthy Mr Rochester would buy for her, she is expressing that tradition in British political culture which, dating from the 17th century, has always been highly condemnatory of display in female dress. Jane Eyre rejects not only the actual dresses but the expectation that she should accept and expect, through wearing them, admiration. This 19th-century tradition of the association of female dress with female moral standing continued throughout the 20th, but it began to develop some important and significant strands.

The strands that we can see in the past one hundred years are, first, those of the continuation of male control over female dress, second, the increasingly classed and racialised appearance and judgement of dress, and finally, the gender ambivalence that can be seen emerging in aspects of dress in the period. Over and above these strands we can also note the increasing part that the production and consumption of dress has come to play in both national economies and the collective imagination of those contexts. As an illustration of that last point we can note the political use of the dress of women that was made by suffragettes in the UK in the early 20th century. As the historian Susan Glenn has suggested, the parades of the smartly and uniformly dressed British suffragettes were designed to demonstrate the political power of both “moral heroism” and beauty³. The wearing of the virginal white by the suffragettes was a challenge to those

² *Little women* was first published in the United States in two volumes in 1868 and 1869.

³ S. Glenn, *Female spectacle: The theatrical roots of modern feminism*, Cambridge, Mass. 2000, p. 123.

who might have perceived anything potentially transgressive in the appearance of the campaigning women.

But as the history of British feminism demonstrates the demands made by women in the late 19th and early 20th centuries were for forms of social emancipation other than that of the right to vote. Central among them were the demands for access to higher education and professional employment. In these campaigns one aspect of that first theme – the classing and racialising of women’s dress – was born. It was the perception of the association of those women that allowed access to “higher” learning with various degrees of contempt for matters of dress. For much of the 20th century women’s access to higher education was limited, like that of men, to a small percentage of the age group. But for those who did invade the sacred portals of the universities what they encountered was not unlike that met by the academic Monica Jones, who studied English at Oxford University and was then, in 1946, appointed to a post at what was then University College, Leicester. Monica was given to understand that in order to succeed as an academic she should not “wear feminine clothes. Leave them to the Cowley workers on their Friday-night-out razzle”⁴. The lifelong partner of Monica Jones, the poet Philip Larkin, presented such a picture of women students of the 1940s:

The lecture room was full of young women in short gowns, carrying bulky handbags and enormous bundles of notes; they smelt inimitably of face powder and (vaguely) of Irish stew and they were dressed in woollen clothes⁵.

What Monica’s experience, and Larkin’s fiction, speaks of are two arguably persistent traditions in the UK. The first is that “feminine” clothes, especially those that “razzle”, are associated with what was then regarded as working class, and certainly little educated, people. In a country such as the UK, with an intensely active system of the visual recognition of class (as Owen Jones has pointed out in his book *Chavs*), clothes speak class⁶. The second is that intelligence in women, and certainly the pursuit of an academic education and/or career, is one which turns women into those feared “blue stockings” who develop unappealing (certainly to eyes such as those of Larkin) physical characteristics. What is here at work is a tangled knot of associations: that women have to work harder than men to succeed in the academic world (those “bundles of notes”), that they become increasingly careless of dress through academic study and, perhaps most importantly, that how to dress is far from being an insignificant part of individual experience, it is, by its very refusal, a crucial part. The actual importance of the dowdy appearance of the women students is not so much about the aesthetic of their dress, as about the demonstration of their refusal to engage with the possibilities of individual appearance. But that very refusal was not always straightforward.

⁴ J. Sutherland, *Monica Jones, Philip Larkin and me*, London 2021, p. 28

⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁶ O. Jones, *Chavs: The demonisation of the working class*, London 2011.

That same Monica Jones, who herself became fascinated by dress, nevertheless clearly internalised a suspicion of women who were well-dressed. When a younger, fashionably dressed woman, became a colleague of Monica Jones, she was instantly critical of her for that very characteristic. But – and in a way that unites the male control and policing of women’s dress with that of women’s commitment to it – Monica Jones did not dispute Philip Larkin’s caution to her “to tone down her clothing in the country” – her town clothes suggested “promiscuity”⁷. The creation of that imagined male predator, whose sexual desires are awoken by aspects of the dress of women, is of course a common characteristic of many societies. That predator is very seldom real but that imagined self acts as both an object of fear for women and, as many English legal judgments in cases of rape or other forms of sexual violence can demonstrate, an indication of the way in which the dress of women is assumed to be an aspect of women’s behaviour which is a legitimate context for moral judgment⁸.

When Monica Jones (and Philip Larkin) attended Oxford University in the 1940s they were amongst a tiny percentage (about 5%) of their age cohort who went onto higher education. That minority was almost exclusively middle class, male and white, and it was not until the UK expanded access to higher education in the 1960s and 1970s that more middle class white women entered university. These years saw not just that expansion of educational opportunity but also the increasingly vocal and evident voices from women about a range of concerns on matters of dress and social behaviour. Dress did not become a matter of politics in the 1960s, it had long been that, but what did occur was that the rejection of conventional standards of dress, supported and enhanced by a consumer revolution in which clothes for the young and the fashionable became widely available. “Fast” fashion, as it is now described, arrived and considerable fortunes were made. Feminist arguments in the 1960s and 1970s about the rights of women to choose their own dress and, most emphatically, not to be judged for it, were part of a new, ostensibly class-less younger generation. But aspects of dress and fashion, and thinking about both, retained many of the signifiers that had always existed. What, in fact arrived, was a replacement of the clothes that were simply expensive with the clothes that were described as “designer”. The label on clothing now carried a demonstrable association with both class and the obvious wealth. With this, inevitably, came a need for designers to develop a visible identity for their clothes. Chanel and Dior had long produced clothes that brought about changes in the clothing of millions of women quite as much as offering extraordinary clothes for the rich. But the designers who emerged in the 1960s and the 1970s (Versace, Yves St. Laurent, for example) were part

⁷ J. Sutherland, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

⁸ N. Lacey, *Women, crime and character: From Moll Flanders to Tess of the D’Urbevilles*, Oxford 2008.

of a culture in which the presence of a unique, and instantly recognisable, aesthetic was essential.

The aesthetic appeal of clothes was one which the real life figure Monica Jones had always been intensely aware of, perhaps wishing to avoid the picture the author Dorothy Sayers had presented in fiction of women dons, inevitably dressed with various degrees of shabbiness. In *Gaudy night*, her novel of 1935, Sayers gives us an entirely accurate picture of women fighting for a place in a very male world and in doing so manifestly finding it essential to define femininity in a way that cannot suggest appeal to, or interest in, men⁹. Yet earlier in the same century the psychoanalyst Joan Riviere had suggested in her famous article of 1929 that the very femininity which Monica Jones, and millions of others, worked so hard either to present to the world or to disguise in it, was in effect a “mask”¹⁰. Moreover, that very mask did not conceal a reality, that reality did not exist. The strength of this argument remains, given that from 1929 onwards it has been clear that “the feminine” can emerge in various ways and that this very inconsistency powers highly profitable industries.

But one further aspect of the tangle of women, fashion, femininity and academic success is important here and that is what generations of writers have defined as the “contradictions” of femininity. In 1946 the sociologist Mirra Komarovsky argued that women are at pains to suppress or to disguise their intelligence and their various forms of competence lest it should be a challenge or a threat to men¹¹. Writing of college educated women, Komarovsky spoke of the concern women felt at the labels of “blue stocking” or “brainy”. Two decades later, feminists returned to the issue and wrote, as did Matina Horner, of the need to understand the “achievement related conflicts in women”¹². Some fifty years after Horner it would be difficult to deny that this fear still exists or that the concern with appearing “feminine” has disappeared. A glance at the ways in which the two women Prime Ministers of the UK dressed would suggest that the need to exhibit femininity, even in women in positions of considerable power, remains central. Yet whilst this exhibition of the feminine, so much embraced by Margaret Thatcher and Theresa May, was in one sense a very straightforward public message of womanliness, it also asserted another aspect of the conventional gender differences and distinctions which fashion and dress support. It was that in the forms of dress that Thatcher and May embraced there was not just an explicit

⁹ This theme is explored in V.M. Plock, *Modernism, fashion and interwar women writers*, Edinburgh 2017.

¹⁰ J. Riviere, *Womanliness as a masquerade*, “Journal of Psychoanalysis” 1929, Vol.10, pp. 303–313.

¹¹ M. Komarovsky, *Cultural contradictions and sex roles*, “American Journal of Sociology” 1946, Vol. 52, pp. 184–189.

¹² M. Horner, *A bright woman is caught in a double bind*, “Psychology Today” 1969, Vol. 3, No. 6, pp. 184–189.

demonstration of “being female”, there was also an accompanying message of supporting, through dress, the distinct and binary differences between male and female genders. These messages of two women in the highest political positions in the UK spoke very explicitly to a normative world in which it remained necessary to uphold binary, and supposedly “natural”, distinctions between male and female. The inevitable contrast with the working uniform of Angela Merkel (essentially a jacket and trousers) spoke to a view of the world in which competence, skill and ability were not gendered. That 18th-century question of “does the brain have a sex?” was answered by these three women in very different ways¹³.

The question of the everyday dress of Angela Merkel takes us to another theme about the power and centrality of dress and fashion in our lives. It is that of the issue of cross dressing, or more usually and more simply, women wearing trousers and other items of men’s dress. Women began to wear trousers in the global North in the late 19th century, a minority choice much hastened by forms of work in the World War I and subsequently continued in later decades. Coco Chanel produced trousers as a form of fashionable, as distinct from utilitarian, dress in the 1930s and by the beginning of the World War II women wearing trousers had become part of both urban and rural landscapes. As a form of dress for women trousers were banned for various decades, accepted for what the world of consumption identified as “leisure wear”, they were nevertheless unacceptable in the majority of more formal settings. What is important here is that the previous sentence does not end with the words “until the present day” since there remain numerous occasions when this item of clothing is not acceptable. Court battles have been fought in the UK over demands that women wear high heels to work, less legalistic sanctions remain in place in numerous contexts. It still matters that gender difference is marked by dress¹⁴.

That assumption is a part of a 21st century which has seen the emergence of new debates about women’s clothing which relate to questions of religious, sexual and ethnic identity. Feminists have been divided over questions of the right of women to wear full face veils, to dress scantily and the inter-section of the questions of implications and complexities of dress and fashion with other questions about the place of women and femininity in the 21st century. Typical examples of those complexities about the meaning of the “feminine” are demonstrated in two endlessly re-iterated media comments about dress and getting dressed. One is the much used judgment in what is called in the UK the “Sidebar of Shame” in the online edition of the newspaper “The Daily Mail”. In this context, women

¹³ L. Schiebinger, *The mind has no sex: Women in the origins of modern science*, Cambridge, Mass. 1991.

¹⁴ In 2016 a secretary at the London accounting firm Portic, Nicola Thorp, refused to comply with the dress code which stipulated that all female employees should wear high heels. A petition on her behalf led to the cancellation of the demand.

are praised for looking “effortlessly chic”. It is one of the most absurd comments in journalism of the 21st century, given that the women portrayed are more or less exclusively white, slim and wealthy. What is “effortless” has been acquired at great cost and with considerable thought.

We might view “The Daily Mail” comment as ridiculous, but that is only to condemn: the more important and much more difficult issue is the way in which the aesthetic judgment about “effortlessness” is being used to disguise the deeply exploitative relations of production and consumption with which fashion and dress are connected. An ideal form of that mythical “feminine” is being used in a way that avoids any discussion of those personal and structural engagements implicated in either the making or the wearing of fashion. The women praised in this particular (and widely read) context are as little defined by their work or their views about the world as were the women in the journalism of previous decades, it is the female gender which is on show for its performance in what is essentially the world of consumption.

The many demands made upon women about their appearance in the 21st century ask that we also have to recognise a second much repeated comment made by, and about, women and the ways in which they dress. That is the suggestion that there is a greater plurality about dress in the contemporary world than it was in the world of our grandmothers. Fewer strictures about not wearing trousers, no more looking to the role models of the royal family, no more tyranny of hats and gloves – the apparent disappearance of “rules” in dress. But in place of those strictures there are others: demands about youth and youthfulness, of forms of self association either within or against class and race, of representing a human, dressed, version, of the “new”. To look like “something out of the 1980s”, or a “footballer’s wife” or – admittedly something of a niche position – “a Hampstead lady novelist” are all both negative and positive judgments. All represent aspirations for identifying – or not – the self through dress. The question of who do we want to look like is one that is unavoidable. An example of the ways in which dress carries a considerable weight of classed meaning is that of the failure of Victoria Beckham’s clothing business to become financially successful. At the time of writing the business was losing £12.3 million a year. The issue here is not the clothes themselves but that the high cost demanded for them offered little in terms of the rewards of status and esteem. In short, the label Victoria Beckham has none of that infamous quality which Bourdieu named as cultural capital¹⁵. To wear and to buy expensive clothes demands a return other than that of covering the body: that can be achieved at little cost. But to buy expensive clothes is about buying recognition: not just that we are wealthy enough to be able to do so but that we possess that elusive talent called “taste”.

¹⁵ P. Bourdieu, *Practical reason*, Cambridge 1998, pp. 19–31.

At other end of the financial spectrum, that of people paying, for a variety of reasons, relatively little for their clothing, there are two major kinds of encounter: the clothing of those who have little or no disposable income and the clothes of those who assume that other forms of their social status (their education, their social position) demands of them no interest in dress. In both we meet the social values that dress us as surely as our literal dress. The poor are often ridiculed for the purchase of the “fake” clothes (the “fake” Burberry scarf for instance) and for their informality (the track suit). But the demonisation of these forms of dress is again a form of social refusal: that we are choosing not to consider the poverty of the social world inhabited by the wearer. The reverse side of this particular coin is that general area of taste called “shabby chic” in which what is deliberately embraced is the old, the worn, and the distinctly not “fashionable”. This explicit refusal of fashion by sections of the socially privileged could be read as a very public statement of power by a class of both men and women who might otherwise be deeply engaged in aesthetic judgments. So refusing to think about dress, or regarding it as a straightforward or trivial subject, can be seen to accompany that social position (the entitled, powerful white man) where dress has had two forms: One – that taken-for-granted uniform which has changed little throughout the past one hundred years in terms of its basic items of suit, tie and shirt, the other possible position for men has been that of the bohemian, the *refusenik* of convention in which the tie is refused and the suit rejected. The hats that men once wore all denoted class (from the bowler for the upper class to the cloth cap of the working class man) but male dress, despite these obvious class markers, has had a degree of homogeneity which distinguishes it from that of women. Not being interested in dress was, for millions of men, part of the assumptive world of being heterosexual, of being a “real” man.

And yet, for women, that assumption of the lack of interest in dress was in many ways, for many years, exactly the opposite. For a woman or a girl not to be interested in clothes, in getting dressed, to want to wear “boyish” clothes was regarded as something suspicious. The flamboyantly male dress of a number of women writers in the 1920s was regarded with various degrees of suspicion but also, in some details, copied. In a recent review of a book by Diana Souhami the reviewer, Emma Hogan, quotes from a UK newspaper of 1927 which wrote that:

(...) all the smartest ladies nowadays, particularly if they belong to the intellectual or feminist group, are wearing men’s dinner jackets for evening occasions¹⁶.

It was Yves St. Laurent who was to revive that fashion in the 1960s, a testament to the strength of the pursuit in the visual culture of the global North for gender ambiguity. But that pursuit is, arguably, importantly and essentially about the visual and not the material culture. Yves St. Laurent might have persuaded

¹⁶ E. Hogan, *Daisy chains*, “London Review of Books” 20 May 2021, p. 37.

women to look like men, but the women who wore those much imitated jackets were arguably not attempting to be men, but rather to embrace an aesthetic which blurred the visual markers of gender. For just as the dinner jacket was initially a male garment often associated with the wealthy, so it was also the uniform in which less wealthy men, for example waiters and musicians, spent their working lives. So taking this garment as a symbol of one form of privilege can be complicated by the way in which it is also a garment of service. As a concluding remark here, it is also perhaps worth noting that an extraordinarily wealthy and privileged institution of higher education, Trinity College at Cambridge University, includes in a guide to newly arriving students the advice that a dinner jacket will be needed for social occasions.

Dress, it might be concluded from this, is always complicated and never that simple task of “getting dressed”. We know that authority has always been expressed through dress (sumptuary laws stretch back centuries), whether this is the authority of the state and institutions over collective groups or of individuals over other individuals¹⁷. Explicit laws about dress are only part of the complex ways in which we encounter that everyday question of “getting dressed”. Dress can be explicitly sanctioned but it is also, we might finally remember, something which is part of our own highly personal judgments about others. Dress, and how we do it, involves an intensely judgemental language which relates not just to the clothes themselves but of our view of the person wearing them. To “have let oneself go” is often denoted through dress, and insomuch as it may be about careless dress or the old or torn clothes, it is also an assumption about the emotional health (or otherwise) of the wearer. The question of what the person has let themselves go from is problematic: but often answered in the positive comment which women may make about themselves or others, that they are “high maintenance”. This verdict on a person’s appearance suggests how much is invested in the ways in which we dress. Not to care about dress is very clearly a powerful form of social taboo. How we negotiate this remains a vexed question.

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