Drag = Blackface

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To most educated Americans, performance in blackface is an artifact of long ago, an embarrassing reminder of a distant past in which overt racism was tolerated, as obsolete a form of cultural expression as lawn jockeys or the Uncle Tom in the turn-of-the-century Cream of Wheat ads. In fact, though, the consensus that blackface performance is intolerably racist is of relatively recent vintage. Before that, analyses of blackface minstrelsy—even those that conceded its racism—concentrated on the meaning of the performance to the performers and the audience, ignoring or discounting its meaning to, and impact on, the people being portrayed.

That is the current state of scholarship about performance in drag. Why hasn’t our understanding that blackface is insulting extended itself to drag? In this Essay, I hope to begin that extension, suggesting that the same arguments that forged the cultural consensus against blackface should forge a consensus against drag. We retain a salutary sense of shock when the BBC replaces James Earl Jones as Othello with a white actor in blackface.¹ What will it take to develop that sense of shock when a man plays Lady Bracknell?

In this Essay, “drag” means men dressing as women in public, especially in performance. I argue that a whole range of activities, from vaudeville “illusionists” to the pantomime dame, from Mrs. Doubtfire to La Cage aux Folles, from cross-dresser balls in Harlem to Hasty Pudding theatricals at Harvard, represent institutionalized male hostility to women on a spectrum running from prescription of desired behavior to simple ridicule. These performances may be glamorous or comic, and presented by gay men or straight men. Nonetheless, all of them represent a continuing insult to women, as is apparent from the parallels between these performances and those of white performers of blackface minstrelsy.

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¹ See WILLIAM TORBERT LEONARD, MASQUERADE IN BLACK 123-25 (1986).
My definition of drag excludes private transvestism precisely on the grounds of its privacy, though I invoke the arguments made for public acceptance of transvestism as examples of bad reasoning in support of drag. The definition also excludes women dressing up as men, for reasons that will become clear.

Drag and blackface in American culture are similar in a number of respects. First, each is a masquerade in which powerful or privileged people dress up as less powerful or less privileged people. Examples are legion though, pointedly, examples of drag are more current than those of blackface. Major contemporary Hollywood movies such as *Tootsie* and *The Birdcage* have drag as a central plot device, while the last use of blackface in American film is in movies of the 1950s that are almost never seen. Similarly, drag is pervasive on television, from *Flip Wilson* to *Monty Python's Flying Circus* to *Bosom Buddies* (in which Tom Hanks got his big break in a dress), while blackface is unknown: even the repulsive *Amos 'n' Andy*, originally written by and for two white comedians, was televised featuring African-American actors.

Second, drag and blackface originated when the impersonated people were excluded from the stage; however, each outlasted that original excuse for its practice. That is, audiences were curious to see Africans and African-Americans on the stage long before they were permitted to appear, and plots required the inclusion of women long before women were permitted on the English-speaking stage. But even after African-Americans gained access to the minstrel stage, white performers continued to impersonate them. Similarly, long after women were permitted on the stage—to this day, in fact—men continue to appear as women.

These practices led to expectations of what the impersonated person ought to look like. For instance, the convention of white performers impersonating African-Americans was so powerful that black performers were required to wear blackface. It seems ludicrous now that black performers had to "black up" to play themselves—that is, black people. But this is no different from women having their breasts enlarged so they will be sufficiently feminine. African-Americans had to be a particular kind of black to


3. See TOLL, supra note 2, at 200-01.
be black enough to satisfy white people; women have to be a particular kind of feminine to be woman enough to satisfy men.

Third, drag and blackface show the person(s) being impersonated in a restricted range of behaviors, characterized by exaggeration that is at least interpretable as insult. African-Americans were shown singing, dancing, being foolish, or longing for the old plantation; women are shown primping, nagging, or longing for male protection. With respect to blackface, at least, the scholarly consensus is clear: such "stereotyping was a primary example of the majority culture's desire to maintain political, social, and economic control by transferring false theories of racial inferiority into a form of comic theater designed to demean African-Americans."  

As Marlon Riggs notes in his documentary Ethnic Notions, blackface made "the distinctive physical features of blacks not only laughable but grotesque." The big lips assigned to African-Americans by blackface performers have a virtually exact parallel in the big breasts that are mandatory for drag performers.

Blackface presents its exaggerations through two standard "types," Zip Coon (an urban dandy out of his depth) and Sambo (a shuffling rural fool). The first makes fun of black people for being free while the second ridicules them for being slaves. Drag has a pair of "types" of its own, the glamour girl and the pantomime dame (an elderly harridan). The first makes fun of women because of their sexuality and the second for their lack of it. This commonality—in which the aspirations of African-Americans and the sexuality of women are either exaggerated or ignored—suggests the parallel nature of the practices.

Both pairs of tropes are deeply reactionary, and both assert that the people imitated need controlling. Zip Coon is out of control, a menace loose in the city; Sambo is simply incapable of caring for himself. The glamour girl is either predatory or helpless; the pantomime dame is either an idiot or a harpy. One and all, they are people who cannot—or cannot be permitted to—care for themselves. And people who do not care for themselves do not get to represent themselves. If people are incompetent to represent themselves, in the political as well as artistic sense, they have to be represented—which

5. ETHNIC NOTIONS: BLACK PEOPLE IN WHITE MINDS (California Newsreel 1987).
6. See generally BAKER, supra note 2.
is to say governed—by others.

I am hardly the first person to notice the larger consequences of performance images. Toll summarizes the problem with minstrel images of black people: "[W]hen white Americans later came in contact with Afro-Americans, whites who were disposed to confirm the caricatures could do it by focusing on the familiar elements, like superstition, love of music and dance, and the 'childish' belief in 'silly' animal fables and by ignoring everything else about blacks." 7 Likewise, even those who defend drag as a valuable or privileged public expression are easily able to articulate the central objection to it. Journalist Holly Brubach, author of a sympathetic portrait of drag queens (men both gay and straight "who dress as women in public, on social occasions"), 8 prefaces her book by saying, "What impressed me about drag... was that it articulates men's idea of women.... [T]he men I found who dress in drag most often became babes if not outright bimbos, bearing little resemblance to the ideal most women have set for themselves." 9 Similarly, Sambo bore little resemblance either to the antebellum slave or the postbellum freed black man of the south.

More insidiously, to the extent that there was a resemblance between Sambo—who resists work, tells lies, and fails to take seriously matters of great concern to the master—and any actual African-Americans in a condition of captivity or dependence, that resemblance was attributable not to black people but to slavery. Thus, Sambo was a presentation of the way white people prefer their black people, that is, enslaved. Moreover, the repetition of the Sambo stereotype conditioned white audiences to recognize only Sambo-like behaviors in the actual African-Americans they met. Small wonder that eradication of the stereotype was a priority for civil rights leaders.

Likewise, to the extent that there is a resemblance between male "pantomime dames" or "glamour girls" and actual women, that resemblance is an indictment of the conditions in which real women struggle rather than a justification of the practice of performance. In this light, the current popularity of drag seems ominous. It means that men become more insistent on displaying the traditional roles of women as many women challenge them: "No, no, you don't get it,

7. TOLL, supra note 2, at 51.
9. Id. at xviii-xix.
being a woman looks like this.”

Fourth, the forms of drag and blackface perform the same function: to ease the minds of an audience threatened by change (whether this pertains to the coming of abolition or the advent of sexual equality) by presenting the agents of that change as ridiculous rather than frightening. Precisely because the performances are about change, what they “mean” is not a fixed thing but changes over time. T. D. “Daddy” Rice, the man whose minstrel turn as “Jim Crow” lends its name to every aspect of American racism, intended and imagined himself as a respectful interpreter of the exotic culture of African-Americans. Even that original intention could not and should not have saved blackface from its critics. At a certain point white audiences had to acknowledge that it was unfair for black people to bear the burden of being misrepresented for the purpose, mostly, of other people’s comfort. It is about time to acknowledge the same thing about women.

Clearly, the forms are not identical, and the parallels between oppression based on race and oppression based on gender are inexact. Because gender cross-dressing is also associated with anxiety about sexuality (as blackface is not, at least in any obvious way), drag carries multiple meanings in a way that blackface does not. These multiple meanings contribute to the most striking way in which blackface and drag are not alike: the continued, unapologetic practice of drag.

An account of the process by which blackface became anathema—a confluence of events including the rise of the twentieth century civil rights movement and the rise of realism in the arts, especially the movies—is beyond the scope of this Essay. Instead, I will consider the ideas around which that process coalesced. There are two of them: (1) that the portrait of African-Americans contained in blackface minstrelsy was an insult and (2) that the fact of portraiture itself was unacceptable. The first idea is based on what is portrayed and revulsion at such a portrayal. The second idea is based on who is portraying. It rests on the understanding that any cross-racial performance constitutes an appropriation—a theft—of blackness by whites.

The second half of the consensus is weak enough that people occasionally defend (the very few) contemporary uses of blackface by

adverting to the intentions of the performer. When Ted Danson blacked up for a public performance in 1993, he and his long-time lover Whoopi Goldberg imagined that his nonracist credentials ("lover of a black woman") would protect him from objections. They were wrong. If the insult is simply to believe that the culture and experience of black people is trivial enough to be put on like a costume, the intentions of the performer are not relevant. The content of the performance may be respectful, but the very fact of the performance is disrespectful.

Most people understand this point well enough to be appalled on re-reading Norman Mailer's essay *The White Negro*, in which he posits African-Americans as the repository of authenticity from whom white people must learn. "Only by cultivating his 'dark, romantic, and yet undeniably dynamic view of existence' can the white man reconnect with the primitive, vital 'Negro' within himself, and thereby recapture his own vaunted 'individuality'."

This is an embarrassment to read today—get in touch with your inner Negro?—but how is it any different from announcements by male cross-dressers of every stripe (from straight transvestites to gay drag queens to Dustin Hoffman in the movie *Tootsie*) that wearing women's clothing enables them to get in touch with their authentic inner woman, their feminine side? Taking this claim at face value, one sees the whole problem: drag enables men to decide, and then to claim, what is "feminine"; and it permits men to ascribe certain characteristics to women and certain others to men, and then regard the remaining characteristics as problematic if they happen to show up in a member of the wrong gender.

11. See Thomas Huang, *When the Laughter Stops*, DALLAS MORNING NEWS, Apr. 13, 1995, at 1C (noting that Danson and Goldberg had explained the act as "a parody of the racism they had run into during their relationship").

12. As bell hooks explains,
It is a sign of white privilege to be able to "see" blackness and black culture from a standpoint where only the rich culture of opposition black people have created in resistance marks and defines us. Such a perspective enables one to ignore white supremacist domination and the hurt it inflicts via oppression, exploitation, and everyday wounds and pains.


The culture and experience of women is not a costume. Everything I do is feminine, by definition, because I am female, while any decree about what is feminine restricts my range of options. When RuPaul says, "we're born naked and the rest is drag," he is wrong. He is in drag because he is a man, and he can stop being a woman whenever it becomes inconvenient. When being a woman is inconvenient for me, I need to remove the inconvenience. Male ideas of "femininity" are a major inconvenience to those of us who are actually women and have to live our lives in that state.

Is drag the most important aspect of male discrimination against women? No, probably not; nor was the eradication of the big-lipped Gold Dust Twins the most important victory of the civil rights struggle. But images do matter; we learn to see and understand people according to what we have been told about them. The more white people portray black people, the less room there is for black people to speak for themselves. The more men portray women, the harder it is for women to be understood for themselves.

The parallels between drag and blackface are so obvious that it seems bizarre that the intellectual consensus against blackface has not formed against drag. Instead, defenses of the practice continue to appear. All four of the principal defenses are, in my opinion, false. Drag is not a liberating challenge to gender stereotypes, nor is it a timeless statement of gay pride, nor is it legitimated by female cross-dressing, a practice separate and unequal. Nor is it funny.

A number of scholars argue that drag contributes to women's liberation by subverting gender stereotypes, revealing the constructed nature of most gender-linked behavior. At its most extreme, this argument disputes the reality of gender itself:

[T]he arguments of modern theorists such as Garber, Butler, and Joan Riviere [are] that all gender is performative or, in Riviere's famous phrase, a "masquerade"... While [an earlier] account posits an interior self to be shaped and corrected by performance, modern accounts argue that this interiority is an effect produced by the masquerade, and that status as "woman" or "man" is achieved not by being born with a particular anatomy but by performing gendered behaviors successfully in accordance with prevailing social norms.

15. BAKER, supra note 2, at 258 (quoting RuPaul).
17. Ellen Bayuk Rosenman, "Just Man Enough to Play the Boy": Theatrical Cross-Dressing
Thus: "Genders can be neither true nor false, neither real nor apparent, neither original nor derived."18

The argument that all gender is performative begins soundly enough with the observation that lots of things women "can't" do are actually merely things that women are not permitted to do, and that therefore it is wise to be skeptical of many essentialist claims. But it is quite a leap from there to saying that there is no such thing as a "woman," and therefore one may claim "womanhood" on any basis, including the possession of an evening gown. This latter argument means that cross-dressing eradicates women entirely. If anyone who puts on women's clothing is a woman, and many of those people do not have a problem with unequal pay or a lack of reproductive rights, then there must not be a problem.

The argument that the very recognition of the category "woman" validates male supremacy is, in this context, false and dangerous. This is clear from the analogy with race. There may be no such thing as "race" insofar as most of the attributes given to people based on their perceived skin color have little or nothing to do with skin color, but "race" certainly does exist if we are trying to understand the experience of people whose skin color puts them at a constant disadvantage in competing for opportunities in a larger society. That experience of "race" is actual and distinct, a fact we readily acknowledge in noting the difference between a white man "blacking up" and a black man. The experience of gender is similarly actual and distinct—if there is no such thing as a "woman," who is being paid seventy-three cents on the dollar?

The fact that women are already oppressed— instructed by men how to look and behave for male convenience—does not mean that the most extreme version of this is therefore inoffensive. Quite the contrary: we need to challenge the most public ways in which men specify women’s conduct so we can overcome even their more subtle dictates. The acceptance of drag is one of those "most public ways," such an obvious imposition of male preference on female decision that it is practically invisible. Just as African-Americans were taught by blacked-up white minstrels that they ought to shuffle—and, more important, white people were taught to expect African-Americans to shuffle—women are taught by dolled-up male glamour girls and pantomime dames to be hyper-sexual, and shown that failure to do so

18. BUTLER, GENDER TROUBLE, supra note 16, at 141.
renders them repulsive and superfluous. Again more important, men are taught the same lesson.

Erika Munk dismissed the claims for drag's subversive status in a few pungent paragraphs in the Village Voice:

At the moment, most men in drag are no more subversive than whites in blackface were when minstrel shows were America's most popular form of entertainment.... The more women fight for autonomy, the less helpful become restatements of stereotype which have lost their critical edge and turned into means of putting women down and aside. Drag may be liberating when it's part of a wave of iconoclastic revolt, but when the culture is rigid and conformist, taking on feminine personae while edging women from the stage is rigid and conformist too. It doesn't have to be so—the radical possibilities remain—but it is.'

Many people understand "drag" to mean private cross-dressing for sexual satisfaction. For the purposes of this Essay, I am indifferent to private cross-dressing (overwhelmingly an activity of straight men), just as I would be indifferent if burnt cork or black greasepaint suddenly gained currency as an aphrodisiac. Private conduct is none of our business. But the set of arguments marshaled by private cross-dressers in support of their call for public acceptance is a matter of public concern, and these arguments are as unpersuasive as those of the feminist scholars whose work (as well as bras) they are appropriating.

Straight men who cross-dress generally describe doing so as a compulsion. If it is, then its victims should receive sympathy, not public approbation. Some people who have Tourette's syndrome feel compelled to curse; that is not an argument for generalized public acceptance of profanity.

In The Man in the Red Velvet Dress, J. J. Allen, a private cross-dresser, makes an argument that he shares with those who affect or defend performance drag. He argues that women have a privilege—to wear satin evening gowns—from which men are unfairly barred.

If men and women are to achieve true equality, everything should be up for grabs: miniskirts, boxer shorts, the office of the president of the United States, congressional seats, wearing cosmetics . . . .

While the women's liberation movement of the sixties was not merely about wearing pants, smoking, or working as a riveter, it nevertheless had its roots in appropriating those artifacts that had once been exclusively associated with masculinity. And while

femininity is about more than simply wearing skirts and cosmetics, men, if they are to be truly equal with women, should be free to appropriate the artifacts of femininity.20

This is total sophistry. First, the women's movement "had its roots" in a demand for justice; the "artifacts . . . of masculinity" were secondary. Second, men are not "equal" with women, they are privileged over them. Men who want to wear women's clothing simply cannot do it in the street without being stared at. This seems like a very small price to pay, hardly comparable to being unable to join the professions.

Allen continues, "[W]omen do not 'own' femininity any more than men 'own' masculinity. So in the same way that feminism wants to destroy the barriers to male privilege that men have erected, [cross-dressers] want to destroy the barriers to female privilege that women have erected."21 Wrong again: "femininity" is not a female privilege—it is a construct designed to keep women in their place. And feminists are not trying to appropriate masculinity, that is, the state of being male or taken for male; we are trying to achieve equal rights. To argue that women's clothing is a mark of privilege, when so much else about being a woman is obviously a mark of disadvantage, is to willfully miss the point, as Allen makes clear when he falsely equates a woman's right to admission to the Citadel with his "right" to wear women's underpants.22 This assumes that an identifying badge of status is the same thing as a privilege, which is only true if you assume what is obviously false, namely, that all statuses are equal.

Allen likewise claims that there is no difference between women's cross-dressing (e.g., to be able to serve as a soldier) and men's cross-dressing.23 He also asserts that there is no difference between the class of things men are expected not to do (e.g., wear evening gowns) and those women are expected not to do (e.g., get paid for their work).24 When Allen refers to disapproval of cross-dressing as "another gender wrong that need[s] to be righted,"25 he is trivializing all of feminism.

Allen borrows from academic theorists of gender-bending to argue that recognizing some clothes as "women's" and other clothes

21. Id. at 125.
22. Id. at 126.
23. Id. at 137.
24. Id. at 121-22, 138-39.
25. Id. at 126.
as "men's" reinforces the oppressiveness of traditional categories.\textsuperscript{26} In fact, though, those categories are precisely the point to a cross-dresser. If these were not specifically women's garments, he would not be interested in them. If there were no performed sex roles connected with a costume, then the entire activity of transvestism—sexual excitement while spending time temporarily as "the other"—would be beside the point.\textsuperscript{27}

Another group of scholars argues that dressing up in women's clothing is a privileged activity of gay men. For the most part, in fact, dressing up in women's clothing is an activity of straight men—and whether it is privileged when done in public is exactly what is in contention.

"Professional drag queens are . . . professional homosexuals; they represent the stigma of the gay world," announces Esther Newton in her seminal study of drag, \textit{Mother Camp}.\textsuperscript{28} "Not all gay people want to wear drag, but drag symbolizes gayness. The drag queen symbolizes an open declaration, even celebration, of homosexuality."\textsuperscript{29} She continues: "[D]rag questions the 'naturalness' of the sex-role system \textit{in toto}; if sex-role behavior can be achieved by the 'wrong' sex, it logically follows that it is in reality also achieved, not 'inherited,' by the 'right' sex."\textsuperscript{30}

This is received wisdom, to the extent anything can be in the contentious world of gender studies; but it is, at best, a half-truth. The only way to argue that drag is gay is to exclude from its definition a whole range of activities in which men dress as women, including not only private cross-dressing but the lion's share of comic drag performance.

Even Judith Butler, who valorizes glamour drag as gay performance art, acknowledges this comic, and ostensibly heterosexual, side of drag, which she calls "high het entertainment."\textsuperscript{31} This includes most people's exposure to drag before the mid-1980s:

\textsuperscript{26} \textit{Id.} at 136.

\textsuperscript{27} As Annie Woodhouse notes in her feminist study of straight men's private cross-dressing, dismissing the claim that the conduct is revolutionary: "Undoubtedly transvestism replicates gender divisions; it relies on images of women which have been used to objectify and oppress them. The transvestite uses this as fantasy for his own pleasure, always retaining the facility to return to the primary status of masculinity." \textsc{Annie Woodhouse, Fantastic Women: Sex, Gender and Transvestism} 145 (1989).

\textsuperscript{28} \textsc{Esther Newton, Mother Camp} 3 (1972).

\textsuperscript{29} \textit{Id.} at 64.

\textsuperscript{30} \textit{Id.} at 103.

\textsuperscript{31} \textsc{Butler, Bodies That Matter, supra} note 16, at 126.
the Hope-Crosby *Road* movies, Flip Wilson as Geraldine in the *Flip Wilson Show*, Jonathan Winters as a washerwoman on the *Carol Burnett Show*, and Jack Lemmon and Tony Curtis in *Some Like It Hot*. Several of these performers are notorious for the fuss they made about their heterosexuality; and, though perhaps they protested too much, there seems little doubt that most comic drag performers (like most people) are straight. To argue that drag is a "queer practice[]" whose "radical specificity" protects it from objection, as Butler does, is both ahistorical and unprincipled, resembling the argument that clitoridectomy is acceptable because it is practiced by Africans oppressed by colonialism—or that blackface was acceptable because it was practiced on stage largely by Jews.

In any case, as historian Marybeth Hamilton makes clear, the universal association of glamour drag with gay men dates in this country from 1928, specifically from the production of Mae West's play *Pleasure Man*, which purported to provide a realistic backstage look at female impersonators ("realistic" being a euphemism for "gay"). As Hamilton notes, through *Pleasure Man*, West almost single-handedly transformed female impersonation from a mainstream vaudeville specialty into an outré pleasure. "[T]hough we take female impersonation's inherent 'queerness' for granted, in fact that assumption is relatively recent. . . . [F]or the fifty years prior to *Pleasure Man*’s premiere, female impersonation had been viewed as wholesome amusement, particularly suitable for women and children."34

Vaudeville female impersonation owed its popularity to the notion that the differences between men and women were so enormous that a man who could pass for a woman was essentially a magician. Thus, it was about putting people—specifically women—in their deeply conventional places. "While vaudeville hailed impersonators as virile men transforming themselves through magical skills of performance, Mae West suggested a far more sensational reading: that female impersonation was a vehicle of homosexual self-expression, a means for gay men to flaunt their true sexual selves."35

Mae West didn’t invent this notion; she derived it from an

32. Id. at 128.
33. Marybeth Hamilton, "I'm the Queen of the Bitches," *Female Impersonation and Mae West's Pleasure Man*, in *Crossing the Stage: Controversies on Cross-Dressing* 107, 107-19 (Lesley Ferris ed., 1993).
34. Id. at 107.
35. Id. at 112.
underground tradition of female impersonation parallel to conventional vaudeville.

The underworld impersonator . . . . made no pretense of showcasing a skill of performance, of attempting to impress observers with impeccable recreations of feminine detail. The whole thrill of his stage appearances lay, on the contrary, in the fact that he was not, technically, performing at all. He was displaying his real, offstage, self-as (in turn-of-the-century terms) a "fairy," a "third sexer," a being who straddled the gender divide.36

However disingenuously, Mae West denied that she had done anything radical with her play, adverting to the existence of mainstream impersonation, which validated sexual stereotypes, to protect her presentation of "deviant" impersonation, which challenged them. But instead of saving her play, she succeeded only in tagging all glamour female impersonation as gay and thus eliminating it from the vaudeville stage.

Once dressing in drag was "recognized" as gay (and then banned), it is not surprising that the gay community would claim appearing in drag as one of the privileges of being liberated, especially when drag queens featured so prominently as fighters in the pivotal Stonewall riot.37 Like use of the word "nigger" in the African-American community, dressing in drag can be seen as an effort to transform a stigma into a badge of pride. But clearly being gay and being effeminate are not the same, and neither of them requires dressing in drag. The connection between drag and gay men is at best vestigial, like the appendix, and thus can be removed. Moreover, once we acknowledge the fluidity of drag's meaning—that it suggests different things to different audiences at different times—we must also acknowledge the claim of women to decide what it means today. No prior claim of meaning can possibly take priority over that of the subject/object of the practice. Some commentators imagine that the complaint of misogyny is directed at drag's gay practitioners rather than at the practice itself.

The problem with the analysis of drag as only misogyny is, of course, that it figures male-to-female transsexuality, cross-dressing, and drag as male homosexual activities—which they are not always—and it further diagnoses male homosexuality as rooted in misogyny. The feminist analysis thus makes male homosexuality about women . . . .38

36. Id. at 115-16.
38. BUTLER, BODIES THAT MATTER, supra note 16, at 127.
In fact, it is just the reverse: this analysis makes male impersonation of women about homosexuals. Drag is misogynistic, no matter who performs it. The relevant fact about gay men dressing as women is that they are men dressing as women. As Kate Millett wrote:

[T]he storm of outrage an insouciant queen in drag may call down is due to the fact that she is both masculine and feminine at once—or male, but feminine. [And thus] [s]he has . . . challenged more than the taboo on homosexuality, she has uncovered what the source of this contempt implies—the fact that sex role is sex rank.39

Drag is not about gay men and their sexuality—not, that is, about the intentions of the performers. (As with blackface, the intentions of the performers are beside the point.) Drag is not about sexuality at all, but about gender, its images and stereotypes—and those always mean things that privilege men and injure women.

Much of the literature about this seems to miss the point, suggesting that the drag performer is the person oppressed. For instance, Rebecca Bell-Metereau is concerned about the stereotyping of drag performers:

Just as film images of blacks, with rare exceptions, have tended to offer only two basic stereotypes—the evil, no-good Negro and the good-hearted Uncle Tom or nanny—movie depictions of female impersonation during the Code era fall into similarly constrained categories. Men are seldom allowed to take on feminine clothing or roles without being punished for betraying their sex.40

This focus on the performer rather than on the woman being portrayed is peculiar, the equivalent of a discussion about what blackface meant to its white working-class performers: possibly an interesting sidelight, but hardly the point. Bell-Metereau continues, “A film that defies society’s codes of dress and sex roles implies that we can be liberated from superficial restrictions and sexual limitations, for in truly exploring androgyny the work taps the most profound psychological and mythic sources of art—the genderless human psyche.”41

This is the conventional defense of drag: that it enables us to transcend restrictions imposed by gender, which is, after all, just a social invention. But I do not have a “genderless human psyche”—I have a woman’s psyche, formed by my experience of being morphologically, biologically, sexually, and socially a woman. As Pat

40. BELL-METEREAU, supra note 14, at 65.
41. Id.
Schroeder said when asked if she were running for President "as a woman," "Do I have an option?" To impersonate gender is not to eradicate it but to reinforce it, to reify it and, more important, the power relations attached to it.

Imitation may be the sincerest form of flattery, but do not tell that to anyone whose work has been plagiarized. Drag performers—gay or straight—plagiarize the appearance and behavior of women, just as minstrels plagiarized the appearance and behavior (or some facsimile) of African-Americans. The historical moment for wearing blackface was over as soon as the larger society was prepared to acknowledge the authenticity of black people. The historical moment for wearing drag should be over now if society is prepared to acknowledge the authenticity—that is, the independent validity—of women.

Some scholars suggest that dressing across gender lines is an equal-opportunity sport because there is a tradition of women dressing as men (as there is not of black people masquerading as white people). Unless you ignore the power differential between men and women in society, this is nonsense. Annie Woodhouse makes clear that all gender-bending is not created equal.

The gender divide is not one of equal balance; the scales of power and control tip decisively to the side of masculinity, which is accordingly attributed primary status. Thus, to deviate from this status is to take a step down; to adopt the trappings of the second sex is akin to slumming it, or selling out.

Thus, women who dress as men are dressing up, seeking power, privilege, or even just protective camouflage from male violence; while men dressing as women are dressing down. As Janice Raymond says in her critique of all things "trans,"

[A] woman putting on a man's clothes is, in a sense, putting on male power status, whereas a man putting on women's clothes is putting on parody. That drag queens and cross-dressers draw hoots and howls in audiences of mostly men says more about how women were and are perceived than it does about the supposed boundary-breaking behaviour of gender-bending men who wear women's clothes.

In other words: masters making fun of slaves, or at most making fun of themselves, do not equal slaves poking fun at masters. Humor

43. WOODHOUSE, supra note 27, at 6-7.
is what masters get in addition to power and what slaves get instead of it. Raymond adds,

Gender bending is gender identity condensed to the point of little or no feminist or lesbian politics. . . . The new gender outlaw is the old gender conformist, only this time we have men conforming to femininity and women conforming to masculinity. . . . What good is a gender outlaw who is still abiding by the law of gender?45

But of course it is not the arguments of feminist or gay scholars that make drag acceptable to the wider public. Scholars in general, and feminist and gay scholars in particular, are held in low regard in American society. To the extent that their arguments have currency, it is because they serve the interests of those who are more powerful. The people keeping drag alive are the people who benefit somehow from the argument that being a woman is something you can just put on and take off. Their claim is very simple: drag is funny.

What exactly is funny about it? Perhaps it is the simple incongruity: you can always knock ‘em dead with chest hair pouring out of the cleavage of an evening gown. Perhaps the contrast between the (male) performer and the (female) performance is, in and of itself, uproarious. But this seems like a pretty thin joke on which to hang years of amusement. Unless you think that men are from Mars and women are from Venus—that is, that differences in gender behavior are huge and immutable—the contrast does not hold much interest. Certainly, the contrast between white performers and black characters was not, in and of itself, enough to make blackface funny. There had to be something else—and there was.

There was ridicule of black people. No one rationalized blackface by suggesting that the very contrast between the (white) performer and the (black) performed was funny or interesting in and of itself. No, what was funny or interesting was the glimpse blackface purported to offer into the world of African-Americans. “Aren’t they stupid?” “Don’t they have weird physical features?” “But they sing good songs and dance funny dances, and doesn’t that prove they’re happy in the confinement in which we’ve placed them?”

Men who dress up as women and adopt stereotyped feminine behaviors are comical because of their stereotyped behavior, and the inference they encourage the audience to draw is not that stereotypes are comical but that women are; not that social restrictions are foolish but that the people restricted are. It would be hard to imagine as

45. Id. at 222-23.
clear an example of blaming the victim—if blackface had not already provided us with one.

This entire society reifies the concept that the behavior of women should be dictated by men because men know best. Men know that marriage is best for women; men know that child rearing is best for women; men know that getting paid and recognized less is best for women. I do not really think that men also need to be able to say that they know—and will demonstrate—how perfectly lean and curveless women should look in their evening gowns.

Glamour drag, which depends on downplaying the incongruity, minimizing the contrast between performer and performed, and concealing the "masculine" within the "feminine," makes clear the prescriptive nature of all drag. The point of glamour drag is not to tell jokes but to perform the feminine. The only reason to hire a man for this purpose—when there are plenty of women available, by definition more experienced and better qualified—is to give men the continued right and privilege to determine the content of the feminine. Just as white people in blackface announced and established the limits of African-Americans' behavior, men in dresses announce, establish, and enforce the limits of what will be expected of, and tolerated from, women.

Minstrel performances of cake-walking took the dance out of its compulsory context to present African-Americans as feckless and jolly in servitude. Similarly, glamour drag takes glamour out of its context, which is the need women have to use sexual attractiveness to secure male protection in a society that punishes women who are without it. And if even those sober-faced performances are funny, it must be because women themselves are a joke. "Look at how vain and foolish they are!" "Look how self-absorbed!" "Look how trivial!" "Aren't women funny when they want sex?" "And aren't they hilarious when they don't?"

Thus, drag's humor depends entirely on the audience's willingness to believe that women are rightfully the butt of every joke. Does it seem humorless to refuse to participate? Well, it was precisely the fact that blackface impersonation was a joke—played by white people, for white people, through the medium of and on black people—that led ultimately to its condemnation. In fact, Ralph Ellison's 1958 essay—perhaps the single most important scholarly contribution to the eradication of blackface—is called Change the
Joke and Slip the Yoke.46 Ellison points out first that what have been taken by white audiences to be the archetypes of the black experience are, in fact, its stereotypes.47 He then addresses the defense of high spirits and boyish fun, saying,

Down at the deep dark bottom of the melting pot, where the private is public and the public private, where black is white and white black, where the immoral becomes moral and the moral is anything that makes one feel good (or that one has the power to sustain), the white man’s relish is apt to be the black man’s gall.

It is not at all odd that this black-faced figure of white fun is for Negroes a symbol of everything they rejected in the white man’s thinking about race, in themselves and in their own group.48 Likewise, the drag queen is a symbol of everything women reject in men’s thinking about gender, and the relish of drag performance—by performer and audience alike—is every woman’s gall.

46. Ralph Ellison, Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke, PARTISAN REV., Spring 1958, at 212, 212-22.
47. Id. at 212-13.
48. Id. at 215.