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The Myth of Menswear

In order to even begin to discuss the history of British menswear, one must first be able to unpack what it means to be considered menswear. The obvious assumption would be clothing popularly worn by men. However, to define what it means to be a "man" would be an impossible endeavor. One of the most falsely established notions is the idea that gender is binary. In fact, how can gender intrinsically "be" anything, when the classification as a whole is a social fabrication? Regardless of being based in arbitrary categories, gender manifests itself in a very real way in quotidian life, especially within clothing. While it may be reductive to equate masculinity with menswear, it allows us to explore the associations between the fashion system and intersectional identities. In his book *Fashion in Focus*, Tim Edwards writes, "Men's dress has a strong history of association with status or rank in society… to the overall significance of class and work in men's lives" (46). Edwards' claim is strengthened by analyzing how gender plays a pivotal role in the nexus of race, class, and status. Clothing has historically been severed into these gendered binaries, solidified by the distinctions between "menswear" and "womenswear" within the fashion industry. However, neither have been able to exist in isolation. Rather, they work in tandem and will continue to do so, as they begin to converge in the contemporary global fashion world.

Performing gender can be likened to putting on a costume, dressing oneself up for the sole purpose of being gazed upon, perceived, and judged. For most, this process is done subconsciously. It's impossible to ignore what's at the center of all social perception, consciously or not, literally or metaphorically: the body. In *Bodies That Matter*, renowned theorist Judith Butler argues that gender is a performative manifestation of a body process, one that is constant, repetitive, and built on a social construction (85). And yet, so much of the presentation of gender is tied to how one dresses the body, clothing. The way in which fashion operates in a "looking economy" creates a system in which gender becomes a function in French philosopher Michel Foucault's analysis of social life. Foucault's work frames how fashion (and more generally, presentation of the body) transforms society itself into a panopticon. The "panopticon is the 'perfect' prison where inmates exist in a state of permanent, total visibility" (Tynan 188). The fulcrum that both the panopticon and societal perception of gender rest on is this constant "threat" of being watched. The relationship between the watcher and the watched lies at the core of the panopticon, based in hierarchical divisions. This separation and intense level of perception resonates immensely with how we interact with dress today. This Foucauldian analysis of the way in which gender is based entirely on socially constructed categories of perception offers a scope to apply the same framework onto the fashion system. It's impossible to ignore the massive effect of gendered divisions in fashion history, much less general society. If the fashion system exists within the walls of the panopticon, then British-American designer Harris Reed is well along in his plan to break out of prison.

Appointed as the new creative head of French fashion house Nina Ricci, Reed's first collection with the label just recently previewed at Paris Fashion Week. The gender-fluid

designer has always been known for his work in the advancement of reimagining fluidity. Rather than approaching his designs as a "fusion" of masculine and feminine, Reed takes these superficial categories out of the panopticon (picture) completely. Reed describes clothing in an interview with GQ as a kind of "vessel to be taken in whatever way you see fit.". He takes a blouse he had designed for singer-songwriter Harry Styles and explains that he might wear the same blouse in a "very sweet and innocent way. But Harry's onstage, chest fully out, sweating, rocking out. He really reclaims it for his own self" (GQ). Masculinity and femininity are not entirely distinct categories. Clothing instead serves as a metaphor; gender isn't found within the clothes themselves, but the individual person and their identity. In this example, Edwards' claim about men's dress' strong link with status is strengthened, but dependent on the culture of those with status. For example, if those "with status" in society are more conservative, perhaps a man wearing a dress wouldn't be a symbol of masculinity and therefore a high rank in society. But at the same time, there seems to be a shift in what is considered to be a desired hegemonic masculinity.

When looking at the history of traditional menswear, there is an obvious shift from 17th aristocratic extravagance to the 20th century no-nonsense black suit, and how both embody the fashions of those with a high societal status. The process of this change, known as the "Great Masculine Renunciation", is conceived by psychoanalyst John Flügel in his book, *The Psychology of Clothes*. This stems from the traditional idea that men dress for function, and need to be appropriately dressed for work, while feminine fashions are more playful and flamboyant; this then, based on pre-existing status divisions based on gender, associate fashion more with women, and dismissed it as frivolous. Flügel famously wrote that, "man had abandoned his claim

to be considered beautiful… and henceforth aimed at being only useful" (Flügel 1930). At the core of utilitarian men's dress lies the traditional black suit. The suit became associated with a certain level of status as it was attire for the affluent, especially those that came into money through the industrial revolution. With muted tones and a streamlined silhouette, the suit is incredibly symbolic of status, power, and reputation. What has been qualified as "masculine", however, has shifted over the course of time, as social systems (and economic and political systems) start to shift. In her book *The Fashioned Body*, sociologist Joanne Entwistle challenges the claim that the suit was representative of "utility", arguing that it was much more a symbol of masculine sexuality. In the 1980s, there was a stark shift into the era of the "new man", the man allowed to be interested in fashion and his appearance. In relation to the (heterosexual) male gaze, marketing, design, and retailing focused in on a new market, targeting the young male consumer. The shift in what views on masculinity were not rooted in fashion "trends" or "taste", but rather the relationship between men and consumption. What had been previously considered hegemonic (culturally dominant) masculinity, a term coined by Raewyn Connell, would characterize someone as being "strong" (lack of emotions), self-sufficient, powerful, and maybe even aggressive. This kind of "traditional" masculinity has long been culturally celebrated, and the kind men would yearn to embody. So when a particular kind of utilitarian fashion, such as a lack-lustre black suit, is the kind associated with this hegemonic model of masculinity, they are able to maintain their rank, just as Edwards suggested. The idea of toxic masculinity however, while still relatively new to mainstream consciousness, has begun to reach the public, and therefore systems of capitalism. If now it can still be considered "respectable" for a man to paint their nails or wear a skirt, the shift occurs in new brands selling and marketing these products

differently. Ultimately, the conception of what clothing is and isn't associated with being of high status or reputability is based on what gender (then race, sexuality, etc.-- aspects of identity) reflect the same.

This shift in hegemonic masculinity is embodied by Harris Reed's career and entire approach to his work. Reed's designs were the first ever collection to be modeled in a gender-neutral show at London Fashion Week in 2021, and his work was even selected to be included at the Victoria and Albert Museum's first exhibition dedicated to menswear, *Fashioning Masculinities*. In the exhibition, an outfit that Reed designed was side-by-side with a 1753 portrait displaying the exuberant clothing of French writer Jacques Cazotte. Co-curator Rosaling McKever remarked, "We really want to show people the long history of changing ideas of masculinity. [What should menswear look like] feels like such a contemporary question, but this is a much longer story than maybe some people realize" (CNN). McKever's point challenges the great masculine renunciation, showing that this shift in men's *interest* in being fashionable never changed, just that what was considered fashionable did. This consideration is inherently tied to shifts in economic systems of capitalism and how consumption is deeply embedded in intersections of identity such as gender, race, and class. As what it means to be "masculine" or "feminine" begins to blur more and more, it's important to recognize the origins of those who first began to challenge these conventional gender norms.

Harris Reed describes his own aesthetic as "romanticism gone nonbinary", with clear influences co-opted to transcend traditional gender norms. Romanticism originated in Britain, gaining momentum in the mid-18th century. The aesthetic, especially in literature and then extending into other areas in life, was characterized by emphasizing emotion, individualism, and

nature. The movement stemmed partly as a reaction against the industrial revolution, once again showing the parallel movements between fashion and artistic aesthetic shifts with economic, social, and political systems. Taking its name from the original movement, the 1980's birthed the era of the "New Romantics", marked by a new aesthetic of contemporary youth culture. The sub-culture movement originated in the United Kingdom, emerging from the nightclub scene. The New Romantic style embodied glam, eccentricity, and androgyny, influenced heavily by David Bowie and Roxy music. These same musical and fashion influences are the pioneers of challenging "masculinity" and "menswear" in the contemporary. Entwistle writes, "Since the 1970's, pop music has provided a forum for the exploration of gender: glam rock bands such as Roxy Music and performers such as David Bowie challenged some of the standard conventions of masculine self presentation" (176). The heterosexual male had previously been the standard set for masculinity, subculture and youth culture groups started to question this narrative, as movements that were the "antithesis of the conventional sobriety associated with masculinity" (Entwistle 176). Reed's designs in the past have been trademarked with juxtaposing sculptural skirts and dresses on traditionally masculine forms, such as the top of a "men's" suit, and the bottom the metal hooping of a skirt. Reed's work is also heavily influenced by the zeitgeist of celebrity culture, designing for countless names in the entertainment industry. Mens dress has never stopped having been associated with status or rank in society, but the bounds of what is considered significance of class have shifted. With musicians today denying the invitation to sing at King Charles' upcoming coronation, it stands to reason that the ways in which fashion denotes status has evolved. Edwards, however, fails to recognize that this fact is not only true of men's dress (as the category itself is socially constructed), but any dress embedded in identity. Reed

flourishes in his identity, feeling that his clothing is “powered by the shame that queer individuals feel” (Elle UK). He explains: “I know who I am and I know I have a purpose… people can play with who they are” (Elle UK).

People are born into a certain identity and told to maintain it their entire lives, fashioning their bodies to represent some metaphor of masculinity or femininity. We aren’t expected to continue pursuing the same hobbies our entire lives. Why then, is this same acceptance of evolution and fluidity not commonly accepted as applicable to gender identity? As designers like Harris Reed continue to walk outside of the walls of the panopticon of gender, these categories further converge. Fashion and identity are synonymous, as the way in which one dresses themselves is rooted in who they are. The two are inseparable, and one’s class and rank in society is an extremely important facet of their identity (and vice versa, as one’s identity shapes their position in society), therefore having strong associations with fashion. This correlation rings true historically for both men’s and women’s wear, and will continue to as the two categories evolve into one, simply clothing, dress rooted in identity.

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