The Rise of Femininity in Menswear

Every garment ever designed for a man can be worn by women without any controversy, but the relationship of men to women’s clothing is extremely different. For men it has always been, and still is today, not totally accepted to care about fashion, let alone wear feminine clothing. Men wore work wear, suits, things that were practical for their occupation, and women wore dresses, gowns -- garments more delicate and suitable for life at home. But, as gender roles and standards have changed through the last century, it has become more acceptable for women to adopt men’s attire. Items like pants were the first to make the transition from men’s only to unisex, but never have dresses, blouses, or high heels made this transition. The many reasons for this are subconsciously, if not consciously, understood by every man in the world, basically it is not okay to dress like a girl because men need to be men, and to be a woman is ‘less’ in most cultures and has been for nearly all of history. This stigma that men do not belong in women’s clothing obviously dictates a lot of what goes on in the fashion industry, which is itself split into two factions, one for each gender, and although woman’s fashion often takes from classic menswear, the opposite is rarely true. It is just not a common site to see anyone promoting dresses for men, but maybe that will change soon. In recent seasons, the elite designers of the fashion world have been taking more risks in advancing androgyny and femininity in menswear. Now, as standard men’s attire was appropriated for women, so too is feminine style making the transition to menswear. In the following pages menswear shows from various years, will be compared and discussed, highlighting the tangible shift from masculine to feminine, but first, gender, sex, femininity, and masculinity need to be generally defined for clarity.
Gender and sex, though commonly used interchangeably, are not synonyms. Gender is derived from sex, but there are key differences. Sex is a means of categorization for organisms. Designation of sex is dependent on physical features of the body. Gender is shaped by role, appearance, behavior, and cultural standards according to PHD and clothing historian, Jo Paoletti.¹ Simply put, sex is the body one is born with, and gender is an aspect of one’s identity. The two binary sexes are male and female, men and women are terms that suggest that the individual both identifies as and has the physical traits of a the sex/gender. Here is where sex and gender begin to be used interchangeably. From the binary genders comes the terms masculine and feminine. These words are used to describe anything that feels or appears more related to men or to women (or are men or women). These terms are extremely relative to time periods, cultures, and contexts, so their meaning shifts. Both gender and sex were once considered to be completely binary, but in the last few decades this idea has been eroded. Now the idea of gender and sexual fluidity is more accepted than ever, which is probably linked to the emerging prominence of androgyny and femininity in menswear. The wide acceptance of binary sex/gender has always separated men and woman, and thus clothing has always been separated in two factions: Woman’s (near the only type of fashion on runways until relatively recently) and Menswear. Traditionally, these two kinds of fashion rarely mixed, and each was respectively either masculine or feminine.

¹Jo paoletti
As previously stated, a large part of gender is based on appearance, and appearance of
clothes is logically the next closest thing to physical appearance of the body, meaning that
clothing has gender. What makes a garment inherently feminine or masculine is perhaps the most
important definition for my argument. Certain features of women and women’s clothing are
strongly tied to femininity because of history. What women have worn, and things that have been
delegated as things for women are immediately recognized by people as feminine, even if they
don’t know why. Prime examples of this in attire are dresses, lace, stockings, high heels, ear
rings, and make up. Long hair has also been traditionally feminine, and scientifically certain
physical features are strongly feminine, such as wide hips. Some feature’s gender is dependent
on the culture, but in this era of international connectivity, most features are globally understood.
When these features are seen, our minds see them as feminine. It’s something somewhat
intangible, but nearly everyone can immediately classify something as more feminine or
masculine.

Menswear in Fashion itself has only been around for a few decades, fashion primarily
being something seen as feminine, and has always been starkly separate from women’s.
Designers focused mostly on classic men’s silhouettes like overcoats, dress pants and suits as
shown in the above looks from Gucci’s Fall 2005 Menswear line. Gucci is a prime example to
investigate because it is an iconic fashion house that has been established for decades, and
because it’s 2016 Fall Menswear show exemplifies feminine qualities.

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Gucci as a house has seen a plethora of creative directors over the seasons, John Ray followed Tom Ford in 2005, and now more than ten years later, Alessandro Michele has taken the reigns. The two shows to be compared are Gucci menswear Fall 2005 (previous page) and Spring 2016 (Below). Two different designers, ten years apart, at the same house.

On the next page is Spring 2016 look 30 and 21. Both are immediately feminine in multiple ways. The looks share lace details, translucent shirts, pastel or feminine colors, ribbons, lace up sandals, and oversized buttons. Every look in the rest of the show has some if not most of these same feminine details. Each of these details contribute to the intense femininity of the outfits because of their individual histories and connotations. Light pastel colors like these are considered feminine because they have been worn by women for a long time, meaning they are a
societal norm for women to wear, but more intrinsically, they are considered feminine because they are soft, something completely out of the masculine hemisphere. The translucent fabrics again speak to this soft vulnerability that is associated with femininity. Where men are meant to be strong and hard, women are stereotypically soft and weak. This contrast is a part of why it is considered taboo for men to don light colored lacy shirts, they are the opposite of what a man should represent according to society.

The classic image of a man’s dress is perfectly showcased below in this Gucci Fall 2005 look, look number 23. The model is wearing matching beige suit jacket and pants, a black sweater, and a grey kerchief. The jacket and pants are the quintessential suit, one that is likely quite close to the one anyone might imagine when someone says “suit.” It is also the one that
nearly every business man in America has worn (and still wears) since the beginning of the 20th century. The materials and colors, unlike the Gucci looks previously discussed, are muted, strong, and opaque. There is less feminine fluidity to these clothes, and more masculine rigidity. This style is the epitome of masculine fashion, unadorned, understated, and stiff. The 2016 show is almost the perfect opposite: ornate, bright, and fluid.

The drastic differences between the two shows are telling of things to come: what was once considered strictly feminine clothing is transitioning into menswear, the same way that pants crossed over from male only to universally accepted in the 1920’s.

Another designer working with gender fluidity and androgyny is Demna Gvasalia, creative director of his own label Vetements, as well as the newly appointed creative director of Balenciaga, another house on a similar level as Gucci.
Left is the first look from Gvasalia’s first collection at Balenciaga Fall 2016 Ready-to-Wear, right is Vetements Fall 2016 Ready-to-Wear. Gvasalia plays with gender throughout his shows in a few different ways. In his Vetements shows, he often has male models mixed in with females, as well as making many of his women androgynous. Look 28 (above right) is great example of this. In this look other techniques of gender fluidity can be seen. The oversized plaid shirt is reminiscent of a lumber jack’s attire, which, in combination with the model’s masculine hair cut, makes the look very masculine. This masculinity is then countered...
the thigh high patent leather boots, a staple for prostitutes and strippers, and the models actual
gender.

After the massive success of Vetements, and Alexander Wang stepping down from his
role as creative director for Balenciaga, Demna Gvasalia was selected by the house to take the
title. His first show as creative director of the house was filled with re-imaginations of classic
women’s business silhouettes and outerwear. Gvasalia’s take on these staples involved a lot of
deconstruction, added padding, abstracting of shapes and silhouettes, and off the shoulder
jackets. In a similar way as his Vetements shows, Gvasalia plays with standards, twisting and
abstracting them.

With praise from legendary fashion houses like Balenciaga, and approval from thousands
of young influential artists and designers, Gvasalia is set to really change fashion. His
androgynous and gender fluid style is something that other brands have already taken notice of,
and will certainly try to compete with in the coming seasons. Gvasalia is a perfect example of
how the next generation of designers will work with gender to progress fashion.

Woodhouse, author of *Fantastic Women: Gender, Sex & Transvestitism*, claims that for
men to don women’s clothing is inherently odd or unordinary. This could mean that it may only
be a fad or gimmick that will fade. However if it does continue to progress, the world may
forever change. D.S. Gutterman, writer for *The Masculinities Reader*, suggests that men are in a

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3 Woodhouse
perfect position to disrupt the status of gender specific fashion.\textsuperscript{4} Since men are in a position of power, they have the unique opportunity to reshape societal gender roles standards. If both designers and men continue this relationship of creating and buying feminine clothing, then this style will grow and break the standard. Dunja Brill, author of \textit{Goth Culture} suggests that the stark divide between men and women’s wear is a way of reinforcing the power divide between men and women.\textsuperscript{5} By having distinctly different clothing, men further assert their dominance and power. If men and women’s wear becomes closer to one, and the gender boundaries become less strict, it imaginable that the male patriarchy could lose its hold on our society.

After centuries of separation, clothing is starting to lose its binary nature. With youthful designers like Alessandro Michele and Demna Gvasalia at the helm of iconic longstanding house’s Gucci and Balenciaga, the lines of gender in fashion are progressing towards a more dynamic era. This new era is the product of a long history of men and women’s fashion, and soon there will no longer be such a stark divide between male and female, masculine and feminine fashion. What this means for the world beyond fashion is great, gender bias and inequality could be greatly reduced in a world without such strict gender boundaries.

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{4} D.S. Gutterman, \textit{Postmodernism and the interrogation of masculinity} (Cambridge: Polity, 2001)}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{5} Dunja Brill, “Masculinity in Style,” \textit{Berg Fashion Library}, 2008}
Bibliography


I did not end up using this source in my essay but it did have some interesting ideas on Masculinity and gender roles. A lot of ideas in this were shared in “Masculinity in Style”, the next entry in this Bibliography.


This source was probably the most helpful as far as secondary sources. Not did it have useful facts, information and original analysis, it also had a lot of citations that led me to other helpful scholarly resources.


This is an interesting article that I did not end up using because I felt I had no place that it fit well, and the information was not quite what I was looking for.


I thought this book would be really useful so I went out and tracked down a copy, but it was more of an interesting coffee table book than a scholarly resource.


I found this article through “Masculinity in Style”, and found it interesting and useful. He talks mostly about the power surrounding masculinity, which relates to my ideas of how gender specific clothing relates to gender power.

I chose to look at Vetements because of how popular they are as a young brand and how they play with androgyny and gender norms. Also I am a personal fan of the label.


Looking at Michele for Gucci made perfect sense because of how obviously feminine his last collections have been, and also because Gucci is one the most well known, respected, and longstanding fashion houses.

   http://www.bergfashionlibrary.com/page/Fashion$0020Dress$0020and$0020Gender/fashion-dress-and-gender#UnderstandingGender

   This article is by Jo Paoletti, a clothing historian who focuses on gender. Her writing is perfect for my essay because she is an expert and all of her work relates to mine. Also on this site were a lot of other useful sources about clothing and gender.


Looking at John Ray’s Gucci was perfect to contrast with 2016 Gucci, they show nearly the opposite kind of gender standards, but they are collections from the same house.