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COSTUMING THE BODY:
ON GENDER CONSTRUCTIONS IN JAMES, CHOPIN, AND
WHARTON

In this essay I will reread some canonical texts of American literature from the perspective of how womanhood is shown to be made through the inscriptions of costume on the body. Applying John Searle's basic formula concerning the constitutive rules of institutions, "X counts as Y in context C" (*Speech Acts* 52), to the construction of the gendered body, one can say that when positioned as the Other, an object, whose inscriptive body is foregrounded and put forth as spectacle, the person is constructed as a woman.

As is well-known, Simone de Beauvoir was the first to take an uncompromisingly constructionist approach, already in 1949, to female subjectivity when in her Introduction to *The Second Sex* she insists that woman "is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is Subject, he is the Absolute—she is the Other" (XIX). Of course, constructing woman into the Other has served as the prerequisite of the construction of the male self: only vis-à-vis the otherized woman is the centered male self the man. Not only is it more typical for men, Luce Irigaray insists, to say "I" to designate themselves (*I Love* 65), but it is safe to say that the female identity "originates in man" (64). Moreover, given the binarity implicit in Western thinking, the category of the woman as other must be constructed in order to complement the category of the man. "The woman's position as Other to the male subject," Jessica Benjamin argues, goes hand in hand with "the binary logic that

produces the complementarity of male subject-female object" (*Shadow of the Other* 37).

Womanhood is constructed, therefore, by a sense of its own definition from the outside: the subject that constructs her into an otherized object, offering her an image that originates in society. She is dependent on the approval of others for recognizing her own self-worth. Defined by others, she is, indeed constructed through discourse owned by the other. Moreover, woman's objecthood extends to being an exchange object, a prize, in the homosocial world of men, as Gayle Rubin ("The Traffic of Women") and later Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has demonstrated (*Between Men*). Her desire that her subjectivity be affirmed is never satisfied; woman remains an object, an empty receptacle without substance (subjectivity), who is, moreover, interchangeable with other women.

The construction of the self as other is intimately tied to the foregrounding of the body; both including the intense workings of power. Indeed, as Michel Foucault has overwhelmingly demonstrated, an all-pervasive movement of power against the body can be observed in the modern era (see *Discipline and Punish*, for example). In particular, women's bodies have been the sites upon which the machinery of power has operated, making them into "subjected and practiced" "docile bodies," to use Foucault's apt phrase from (*Discipline* 138). Woman's body, this always already gendered, racialized, and sexualized material, will act as the surface, the "field of intersecting material and symbolic forces," as Rossi Braidotti puts it ("Identity, Subjectivity" 169), for multiple social inscriptions. Power is exercised incessantly on the female body; the manipulation of the female body emerges, Susan Bordo has pointed out, "as an absolutely central strategy in the maintenance of power relations between the sexes" (*Unbearable* 143). These strategies include the stylization of her body, or regulatory practices whose function is the normalization or standardization of the body. Woman's acts will follow regulative rules that allow her performance to be meaningful within a particular set of conventions. In other words, its performative force depends on what Jacques Derrida calls a "context of legitimate, legitimizing, or legitimized convention" ("Performative Powerlessness" 467). These various stylized and repeatable acts, then, produce her as woman (woman produced by institutions and discourses) with a self gendered normatively.

Costume is the most obvious form of normative stylization. Whether the clothes adhere to masculine or feminine normativity, are expressions of transgendered identities, or are just vehicles of playful experimentation or fantasy (as is cross-dressing and drag), the performative power of the dress cannot be overestimated. Virginia Woolf was probably the first to come to the conclusion that costume plays a large part in gendering us into men and women. Here is the relevant passage from *Orlando*, exploring the ways clothes make people, changing their views, and actually wearing *them*.

Vain trifles as they seem, clothes have, they say, more important offices than merely to keep us warm. They change our view of the world and the world's view of us. [...] Thus, there is much to support the view that it is clothes that wear us and not we them; we may make them take the mould of arm or breast, but they mould our hearts, our brains, our tongues to their liking. (170–171)

When changed into a woman wearing dresses, "Orlando curtsayed; she complied; she flattered the good man's humours as she would not have done had his neat breeches been a woman's skirts, and his braided coat a woman's satin bodice" (170). Moreover, changes could be detected even in her face; but certainly the most important difference between a man and a woman lies in the possibilities available to them:

If we compare the picture of Orlando as a man with that of Orlando as a woman we shall see that though both are undoubtedly one and the same person, there are certain changes. The man has his hand free to seize his sword, the woman must use hers to keep the satins from slipping from her shoulders. The man looks the world full in the face, as if it were made for his uses and fashioned to his liking. The woman takes a sidelong glance at it, full of subtlety, even of suspicion. Had they both worn the same clothes, it is possible that their outlook might have been the same. (171)

Moreover, Orlando must come to realize that to be a woman, which includes being "obedient, chaste, scented, and exquisitely apparelled by nature," is "tedious discipline."

She remembered how, as a young man, she had insisted that women must be obedient, chaste, scented, and exquisitely apparelled. 'Now I shall have to pay in my own person for those desires,' she reflected; 'for women are not (judging by my own short experience of the sex) obedient, chaste, scented, and exquisitely

apparelled by nature. They can only attain these graces, without which they may enjoy none of the delights of life, by the most tedious discipline. (143)

When recognizing that women are not women “by nature” but made through the daily regimes of “hairdressing,” “looking in the looking-glass,” “staying and lacing,” “washing and powdering,” “changing from silk to lace and from lace to paduasoy,” and “being chaste year in year out” (43), Orlando actually argues against essentialism and for constructionism.

The construction of woman as having a decorative corporeality is tied to one of the defining qualifiers of Western epistemology, the one that privileges the eye among the senses. In this epistemology, the woman has been turned into the visual object, the object of the gaze, where the economy of the gaze is always gendered and is always rooted in power. Indeed, woman has been subjected to the gaze of men, where the gaze is understood as the extension of power. Here power is located in the seeing subject (in the subject position), whereas subjugation is enforced on the person seen (in the object position); the gaze, therefore, as Ann E. Kaplan has argued, reinforces the dominance-submission patterns of our culture, and creates an interlocking relationship between power and desire. Moreover, constituted by voyeurism and fetishism, the gaze “carries with it the power of action and of possession” (311), and only men can own desire (317). This is the gaze, as Donna Haraway puts it, which “mythically inscribes all the marked bodies, [and] makes the unmarked category claim the power to see and not be seen, to represent while escaping representation” (“Persistence” 283). Through this process, the woman has been turned into icon, “displayed,” as Laura Mulvey pointed it out, “for the gaze and enjoyment of men” (21). Although this presentation of woman as spectacle, as a body attracting the gaze of visual enjoyment is pervasive in our culture, the construction of woman as the iconic object of the gaze is especially obvious in narrative cinema, as has been demonstrated by Mulvey (*Visual*), Kaplan (“Is the Gaze”), and Teresa de Lauretis (*Alice, Technology*), among others.

Much like the inmates in Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticon described by Foucault, women are on permanent display in society, offering the spectacle of the ornamented surface of their bodies prepared by

disciplinary practices according to the accepted norms of gender. This state of being constantly under the disciplinary, commanding gaze and control of authority, will assure, Foucault insists, “the automatic functioning of power” (*Discipline* 201). Women are indeed constantly surveyed by the “panoptical male connoisseur,” to use Sandra Lee Bartky’s phrase, who, by embodying “an anonymous patriarchal Other,” will grant woman an outside perspective and will allow her to “live [...] her body as seen by another” (“Foucault” 72). In other words, she will internalize the gaze and will take over the scrutinizing and disciplining of her body even in the absence of the onlooker. Surveyor and surveyed at the same time, she will produce herself—out of an obedience to patriarchy—as a self-surveying and self-policing subject who treats herself as a sight, a spectacle, an object. The body image, defined by Elizabeth Grosz as a “map or representation of the degree of narcissistic investment of the subject in its own body and body parts” (*Volatile Bodies* 83), will serve as the site of such self-policing for women, who will internalize the image of themselves, created by the policing spectator of woman as object, and be able to put themselves into the subject position only when experiencing their own bodies. Such continual self-observation, involving their bodies as both subject and object, will result in self-production. Moreover, woman is expected to continually make and remake herself; where the assumption behind this imperative is, as Julia Kristeva has demonstrated in her essay “The Subject in Process,” that without such disciplinary practices woman’s body, as everything connected with femininity, is deficient.

The gaze has served as a gendering technique setting apart women from men in a particular way. Coinciding with the binary position of subject and object, it has become part of masculinity (part of the subject position) to look (to size up the woman), and part of femininity (the object position) to be surveyed (to be put on display, to be sized up by men). As John Berger famously puts it, “men act and women appear” (*Ways* 47). Only other culturally imperialized groups had to get used to being constantly looked at, especially blacks and Latinos (in the U.S. context), as Susan Bordo pointed out (*Male Body* 173). Nudity seems to carry very different connotations when applied to men and women; as John Ashbery remarked, “[n]ude women seem to be in their natural state; men, for some reason, merely look undressed ... When is a nude not a nude? When it is male” (qtd. in

Male Body 179). Indeed, when men are looked at, they will be feminized in a manner similar to how blacks and Latinos are feminized under the gaze. This is what happens in gay photography, for example. Or, to take a mainstream example, this is where the movie *Full Monty* gets its twisted humor from: the “absurdity” of heterosexual men exposing themselves (not in a pathological manner)—and thereby putting themselves in the feminizing object position.

In the following I will read texts where woman is presented as a more or less “subjected and practiced” “docile body,” in the Foucauldian sense, by allowing that the discipline of power produce her body in the form of costume. These are cases where existing social scripts are being replayed: when, in compliance with the hailing ideology, the woman applies regimes of stylization to her body or acts according to accepted social norms in order to perform traditional womanhood. As such, woman will invite the gaze that locks her into the object position.

Daisy Miller, Isabel Archer, Edna Pontelier, and Milly Theale—these are staple names in American literature, protagonists of major canonical novels born during the thirty years between 1878 and 1905 (Henry James, *Daisy Miller* [1878]; Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady* [1881]; Kate Chopin, *The Awakening* [1899]; Henry James, *The Wings of the Dove* [1902]; Edith Wharton, *The House of Mirth* [1905]). I would like to add to this list the lesser-known name of Mrs. Sommers (Kate Chopin, “A Pair of Silk Stockings” [1897]), who all but perfects the art of constructing herself through dressing. They all seem to measure themselves to some ideal of true womanhood translated into clothes, while at the same time they also become, in one way or another, the victims of these pressing norms.

I will explore the different aspects of performances of womanhood and show that each of them is hailed by some social discourse, even where they seem to resist it. Dressing appears as a code of etiquette here, tying the novels to the English tradition of the novel of manners, which Tamás Bényei aptly translates into Hungarian as *etikettregény*, or novel of etiquette (*Az ártatlan ország* 59ff). I will identify two significantly different forms of authorial attitude to their discursive construction. According to the first, women use their dressing to express, or not to express, what they (or their authors) imagine as the “inner self”; these are predominantly the women in the James novels,

who, independent of whether they agree in the possibility of matching the dress to the self or not, take the pre-existence of the self for granted. (This claim applies to *The Wings of the Dove* to a lesser degree, for here I found arguments for the catachrestic self too.) According to the second authorial attitude, however, women construct their selves by dressing up; these are predominantly the women in my Chopin and Wharton examples. (This claim applies to a lesser degree to Chopin, for in *The Awakening* I found arguments for the pre-existing self too.) It is in these latter cases where women, knowingly or unknowingly, construct themselves into catachresis—metaphor without referent—by applying the norms of gender to their bodies primarily, in terms of dressing, make-up, and body-movement, and thereby construct their selves too. These are women who are spectacularly not born but made: who know the rules, live by them (more or less), make themselves into women through these rules, and then must realize the consequences of their following of the rules.

The difference between these two approaches to clothing and self—clothing as expressive of the self and clothing as constructing the self—corresponds to the two ways in which, according to Sandra M. Gilbert, English and American modernist men and women see the relationship of costume to self. While male modernists, Gilbert insists, see costumes as either true or false, depending on whether they hide or express “a heart’s truth” (“Costumes of the Mind” 193), women modernists believe that “costume creates identity” (193), and is “closely connected with the pressures and oppressions of gender” (195). Accordingly, Yeats, Lawrence, and Eliot always differentiate between mask and self, but Woolf, for example, sees costume and self as identical, Gilbert concludes (196). While I do not see this distinction to always hold according to the gender of the authors, I consider the distinction itself operative, as I will show, in my cases too. Of course, my first examples come from writers who were not modernists *per se*, and the question of modernism is not the point here either. James, Wharton, and Chopin were pre-modern rather, preceding and preparing in various ways the modernist movement. In terms of applying or problematizing the inside/outside model of the modern episteme, which will later culminate in high modernism, either of them could pass as a modernist. While James will translate the high modernist dualisms into the self/mask or self/dress dichotomy, conceptualizing the invisible self as made visible by clothing, Chopin

and Wharton will problematize the inside/outside dichotomy of the modern episteme, insisting that the self is created by the inscriptions of social norms on the body, with clothing as prominent among these inscriptions.

Whether dressing is considered expressive of the self (as in the James texts) or the self is considered to be produced through dressing (as in the Chopin and Wharton texts), the performative process is citational and theatrical, evoking and replaying existing scripts of womanhood.

1. "Clothes that wear us": the performance of dressing (Henry James)

Henry James' *Daisy Miller*, *The Portrait of a Lady*, and *The Wings of the Dove* have several women characters fully aware of how society inscribes its norms on the female body through stylized performances. Of course, James is known for questioning the pre-existence of his characters; instead, subjectivity is shown as a process in his writings, with personalities evolving gradually. In the following, I interrogate texts where personalities evolve by way of social norms, dressing in particular.

Daisy Miller seems to accept and enjoy her female objecthood brought about by her choice of attire. When she first appears, her taste for fine clothing is emphasized.

The young lady meanwhile had drawn near. She was dressed in white muslin, with a hundred frills and flounces, and knots of pale-colored ribbon. She was bareheaded, but she balanced in her hand a large parasol, with a deep border of embroidery; and she was strikingly, admirably pretty. (5)

Her dressing is the expression of her taste and her innocence: her "hundred frills and flounces, and knots of pale-colored ribbon" both extend her self and stand for the values she is known for. As the innocent girl is introduced into society, however, her virginal nature will give way to flirtatiousness and the knowledge that her "extreme elegance" (23) can attract all eyes. Her becoming a flirt is best conveyed by her self-construction as object, the object of the gaze of men and women alike. For example, she knows exactly how to

provoke men or make a grand impression on Winterbourne by descending the stairs of her hotel:

He waited for her in the large hall of the hotel [...] She came tripping downstairs, buttoning her long gloves, squeezing her folded parasol against her pretty figure, dressed in the perfection of a soberly elegant traveling costume. [...] Daisy Miller was extremely animated, she was in charming spirits; but she was apparently not at all excited; she was not fluttered; she avoided neither his eyes nor those of anyone else; she blushed neither when she looked at him nor when she felt that people were looking at her. People continued to look at her a great deal [...] (29–30)

Never being the subject to look, but always the object to be looked at, Daisy has now become conscious of her body as her greatest asset in society.

In *The Portrait of a Lady* the issue of womanhood as performance is repeatedly articulated. Its representation of the self is, moreover, problematized in a conversation between Madame Merle and Isabel, where Madame Merle defines a woman's clothes and "things" as "expressive" of her self:

What shall we call our 'self'? Where does it begin? Where does it end? It overflows into everything that belongs to us—and then it flows back again. I know that a large part of myself is in the dresses I choose to wear. I have a great respect for *things*! One's self—for other people—is one's expression of one's self; and one's house, one's furniture, one's garments, the books one reads, the company one keeps—these things are all expressive. (187)

In other words, Madame Merle takes the position that clothes and things put the self on display for others; for her, they are the visible extensions and legible expressions of what is otherwise hidden from society. Moreover, clothes and things give body and material to what is otherwise incorporeal and immaterial: the self.

Isabel, however, strongly disagrees.

"I don't agree with you," she said. "I think just the other way. I don't know whether I succeed in expressing myself, but I know that nothing else expresses me. Nothing that belongs to me is any measure of me; on the contrary, it's a limit, a barrier, and a perfectly arbitrary one. Certainly, the clothes which, as you say, I choose to wear, don't express me; and heaven forbid they should!"

"You dress very well," interposed Madame Merle, skillfully.

“Possibly; but I don’t care to be judged by that. My clothes may express the dressmaker, but they don’t express me. To begin with it’s not my own choice that I wear them; they’re imposed upon me by society.” (187)

Probably the first woman protagonist in American literature to recognize that clothes are imposed upon women by society, Isabel basically argues that certain models of behavior, among these the buying and wearing of “things,” are prescribed by society, and as such originate in society and not in her self. She sees clothes as barriers to the manifestations of the self rather than its expression: for her, clothes are the extensions of “society”—or power, or ideology, we would say today—which will make uniform objects out of women. The argument seems to be locked in the modern episteme: it centers around the possibility of the visible expressing the invisible, without questioning the existence of the invisible. Of course, and here James is at his most progressive, it also about the issue of female agency: whether woman is subject by choosing her clothes or is object because her clothes are really chosen by her dress-maker, or society.

Described not just as having a “splendid decorative character,” but also an “authentic” personality of “uncatalogued values” (339), Isabel, however, performs womanhood with a difference. Unlike other high-class women—like the Countess Gemini, for example, who travels “with her trunks, her dresses, her chatter, her little fibs, her frivolity, the strange memory of her lovers” (457)—Isabel resist the pressures of society, at least in terms of clothes, never wearing “anything less than a black brocade” (525), and her sometimes sharp tongue. Indeed, Isabel comes as close to becoming a rebel as it is possible in her social position, “her cleverness [being] [...] a dangerous variation of impertinence” (196).

She made up her mind that their manner of life was superficial, and incurred some disfavour by expressing this view on bright Sunday afternoons, when the American absentees were engaged in calling on each other. [...]

“You all live here this way, but what does it lead to?” she was pleased to ask. “It doesn’t seem to lead to anything, and I should think you would get very tired of it.” (196)

The Wings of the Dove presents several other women who express their differences by dressing differently. The first of these is Kate Croy, “a woman whose value would be in her differences” (42), right

at the beginning of the novel. “[H]andsome, but the degree of it was not sustained by items and aids” (10), Kate has appropriated a particular form of fashion:

She had stature without height, grace without motion, presence without mass. Slender and simple, frequently soundless, she was somehow always in the line of the eye—she counted singularly for its pleasure. More “dressed,” often, with fewer accessories, than other women, or less dressed, should occasion require, with more, she probably couldn’t have given the key to these felicities. [...] She didn’t hold herself cheap, she didn’t make for misery. Personally, no, she wasn’t chalk-marked for auction. (10–11)

So she seems to have attained more—with less. But soon Kate’s “character” cannot hold against the pressures of social codes: she grows into a woman of material interests only, who must see “as she had never seen before how material things spoke to her [...] life now affected her as a dress successfully ‘done up’” (27). Kate will take great pains at dressing—in a theatrical way. Now she uses her looks, her attire, simply to play her part: “to dress the part, to walk, to look, to speak, in every way to express, the part, so all this was what Kate was to do for the character she had undertaken, under her aunt’s roof, to represent” (241)

It was made up, the character, of definite elements and touche—things all perfectly ponderable to criticism; and the way for her to meet criticism was evidently at the start to be sure her make-up had had the last touch and that she looked at least no worse than usual. Aunt Maud’s appreciation of that to-night was indeed managerial, and the performer’s own contribution fairly that of the faultless soldier on parade. (241)

It is in Kate’s character that James abandons the idea of dressing as expressive of the self, allowing Kate to experience self-construction. Indeed, Kate is not only good at performing the norms of gender, but will actually construct herself catachrestically, into a woman with little “substance.” “Wanting in lustre” (367) in comparison to Milly Theale, the protagonist of the novel, Kate is “practically superceded” by the “striking young presence” (367) of Milly, whom James refuses to present as one having merely a socially constructed self. It was a self, James insists, which pre-existed her self-construction through dressing, allowing her a “sort of noble inelegance” (92):

She couldn't dress it away, nor walk it away, nor read it away, nor think it away; she could neither smile it away in any dreamy absence nor blow it away in any softened sigh. She couldn't have lost it if she had tried [...]. (92)

Milly's "noble inelegance" seems to stick out when she is with people who are "only people" (365): in her wonderful white dress she becomes indistinguishable from the noble Venetian surroundings, "the golden grace of the high rooms, chambers of art in themselves" (365). Milly is one of those Jamesian figures who *have character*—and this character may "break out" (366) and show in her dressing and her palace in Venice. The only problem with this supposedly pre-existing self is that it was her wealth which had actually shaped it: "that was what it was to be really rich. It had to be *the thing you were*" (92). So what gave Milly her authenticity—her "noble inelegance" (92)—was in fact money. Indeed, money and the power that went with it had already interpellated her in the Althusserian sense before she could think about how to dress.

2. The social mask of clothes (Kate Chopin)

Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* seems to hesitate between showing woman as having a self which will be expressed by her dressing and presenting the construction of the catachrestic self through the call of social norms, dressing being prominent among these norms.

Edna Pontelier is a high-class woman, a rich Creole wife, whose looks are significant both before and after her spiritual and emotional awakening. She makes a grand entrance during one of her first appearances, when walking along the shore with her friend Madame Ratignolle:

She wore a cool muslin that morning—white, with a waving vertical line of brown running through it; also a white linen collar and the big straw hat which she had taken from the peg outside the door. The hat rested any way on her yellow-brown hair that waved a little, was heavy, and clung close to her head.

Madame Ratignolle, more careful of her complexion, had twined a gauze veil about her head. She wore dogskin gloves, with gauntlets that protected her wrists. She was dressed in pure white, with a *fluffiness of ruffles* that became her. The draperies and fluttering things which she wore suited her rich, luxuriant beauty as a greater severity of line could not have done. (58)

The two women dress extremely carefully, not only as the occasion demands but also to create their own style. Especially Edna's dressing is depicted as the extension of her self: her changes of mood must be expressed by the choice of her dress, dress being "the question" which "too often assumes the nature of a problem" (120). Dress stands between herself and the world; in a sense it is a protective social mask for her, without which her self will show, allowing her to become too vulnerable. This is why, for example, her hesitation about rejoining the company after she already went to her bedroom is expressed by her hesitation about whether to "go to the trouble of dressing again" (92).

Dressing up, however, gains a very different meaning in the climax scene of the novel. Having prepared her body through elaborate and ceremonial forms which Judith Butler calls the "embodied rituals of everydayness" (*Excitable* 152), she constructs her femininity through the *performance* of various effects required for the masquerade of the woman who aims to impress the privileged invitees of her dinner party. She becomes the "fetishized woman," to use Linda Williams' term (372), made up of individual female fetishes such as smooth and scented skin, shiny curls, good breath, round nails. As a consequence of her preparation, she reigns, because she is garbed, like a queen.

The golden shimmer of Edna's satin gown spread in rich folds on either side of her. There was a soft fall of lace encircling her shoulders. It was the color of her skin, without the glow, the myriad living tints that one may sometimes discover in vibrant flesh. There was something in her attitude, in her whole appearance when she leaned her head against the high-backed chair and spread her arms, which suggested the regal woman, the one who rules, who looks on, who stands alone. (145)

Edna experiences something rather strange: she becomes one with her dress. The stain glows with the shimmer of her "vibrant flesh"; the lace matches exactly the color of her skin. Here very obviously it is the dress that makes the woman; having no self to be expressed by her dress now, the catachrestic nature of her gendered self is foregrounded. Her sensations limited to the "extraneous," Edna's ennui comes with the realization of discords coming from an empty cavern: "a chill breath that seemed to issue from some vast cavern wherein discords wailed" (145). Ultimately, Edna Pontelier falls because she cannot reconcile the discrepancy between her self-construction as

object and her self-perception as subject (or desire to be taken as a subject). She longs for the affirmation of her subjectivity but is instead reduced, as all women are in the Lacanian framework, to desired object, “a sexual receptacle, property,” as Elizabeth Grosz puts it, “object, lacking, wanting what men have” (*Jacques Lacan* 134). Edna senses the contradiction between the woman who prepares herself as an object to be surveyed and admired and the one who would claim agency through her art. This contradiction is rooted in the co-dependence between patriarchal context and the woman as other-object-spectacle-body: her self-construction as a woman presupposes the context, which will not make any other scripts available for women. In other words, the transgression of these contexts—to be a woman and to be taken as a subject—is not permitted. Only in the final scene does she recognize the emptiness of her catachrestic objecthood, when she walks into the ocean naked: “for the first time in her life she stood naked in the open air, at the mercy of the sun, the breeze that beat upon her, and the waves that invited her” (175). Only in the ocean can she, stripped of the social mask of clothes, become a “new-born creature” (175). “She dresses down to the raw,” as Janet Beer points out, “she takes off her clothes in order to recodify herself in the eyes of the world, and eventually she gives up, defeated” (177). Because it is too late.

A short story predicated entirely on the normative gender assumptions of culture, Chopin’s “A Pair of Silk Stockings” presents womanhood as both process and product, construction and self-construction. It narrates how “little Mrs. Sommers” goes shopping and dresses herself completely in the department store, lured by the various products that she touches. Although first she wants to spend her unexpected fifteen dollars on her children, she changes her mind once in the department store, until she ends up treating herself only with the luxury items of silk stockings, point-tipped boots, and gloves fitted to her hands. Not only does she buy them, but starts to wear them all too, surprised at the sudden change they bring onto her.

Her stockings and boots and well fitting gloves had worked marvels in her bearing—had given her a feeling of assurance, a sense of belonging to the well-dressed multitude. (265)

Her transformation is performatively brought about by her change of dress, having exchanged “her cotton stockings for the new silk ones

which she had just bought” (264), wearing the “excellent and stylish fit” (264) of the new pair of boots, and enjoying her “little symmetrical gloved hand” (265) after her new gloves were fitted, smoothed, and buttoned. This change takes place step by step, from foot to toe, so to speak—to such a degree that her feet in her new stockings and boots do not even feel to be hers: “Her foot and ankle looked very pretty. She could not realize that they belonged to her and were a part of herself” (264). Probably she herself would agree with Woolf’s comment I mentioned earlier, it is “clothes that wear us and not we them” (*Orlando* 171).

After giving herself the additional treats of a good lunch in a most agreeable restaurant and a matinée theater performance, she gets on a cable car to return to her own life, but with a “poignant wish, a powerful longing that the cable car would never stop anywhere, but go on and on with her forever” (266). If for one day only, she could reconstruct herself into a “lady” which she, having seen “better days” (262), once was probably.

In this short story womanhood is clearly a construction (as well as self-construction and reconstruction): the end-product of the process of wearing womanly things and being engaged in “ladylike” preoccupations. Mrs. Sommers, however, does not simply construct herself by following certain ideals of high-class dressing: in fact she is mostly prepared by others. It is the young girl behind the stockings counter, the clerk in the show department, the “pleasant young creature” fitting her gloves, the waiter in the restaurant, and the usher in the theater, and even her guests who contribute to this performance by carrying out the “disciplinary practices” (Bartky 435) which will feminize her in a particular way. Mrs. Sommers does not perform these acts herself; instead, she will let others serve her, wait on her, or usher her: others will perform the performance acts on the otherized object of her body. Therefore, not only is she not a subject, but actually she is just the patient “suffering” the regimes of power inflicted on her body by others. In the meantime, she will be indeed transformed: she will become the costume; her masquerade will be all-pervasive: with nothing behind or beneath the mask, her womanliness will be nothing more than catachresis.

3. "Well-dressed till we drop" (Edith Wharton)

In Wharton's *The House of Mirth*, Lily Bart knows what duty society prescribes for her: "We are expected to be pretty and well-dressed till we drop," she tells Selden (12). She takes great pleasure in the "luxury" of her pretty things:

As she entered her bedroom, with its softly-shaded lights, her lace dressing-gown lying across the silken bedspread, her little embroidered slippers before the fire, a vase of carnations filling the air with perfume, and the last novels and magazines lying uncut on a table beside the reading-lamp [...] Her whole being dilated in an atmosphere of luxury; it was the background she required, the only climate she could breathe in. (25)

Lily longs for a life filled with this atmosphere of luxury: this is what she wants to breathe in, what she would like to control of her life. Wharton captures Lily's social ambition in her love of dresses and her wanting to be "as smartly dressed as the [rich] women" (83). She admires her rich aunt, Mrs. Peniston, who "belonged to the class of old New Yorkers who have always lived well, dressed expensively, and done little else" (37). This being her "inherited obligation" (37), she could remain an outsider to the world, neither subject, nor object, neither acting, nor being acted upon, merely "a looker-on at life" (37).

With a passion for *tableau vivants*, Lily will live moments of feminine objecthood to the full.

Lily was in her element on such occasions. [...] her vivid plastic sense [...] found eager expression in the disposal of draperies, the study of attitudes, the shifting of lights and shadows. Her dramatic instinct was roused by the choice of subjects, and the gorgeous reproductions of historic dress stirred an imagination which only visual impressions could reach. (131)

under Morpeth's organizing hand the pictures succeeded each other with the rhythmic march of some splendid frieze, in which the fugitive curves of living flesh and the wandering light of young eyes have been subdued to plastic harmony without losing the charm of life. (133)

In *tableaux vivants*, Lily can step into the shoes of any historical character or reconstruct any historical situation; in these performances she is not required to have her own self in any way, rather, the more catachrestically she plays her role, the better performer she will be.

While "displaying her own beauty" (131), she will give up her own self, or admit the fact that the self is lacking beneath the role. Her performance will highlight the fact that she owns nothing of herself: body, beauty, even thoughts and ambitions belong to the role she plays. But she only recognizes this when looking back, when in preparation for her suicide, she tries to "set her possessions in order" (317). It is here that she is confronted with her having been an object displayed for the gaze of men: "like some rare flower grown for exhibition, a flower from which every bud had been nipped except the crowning blossom of her beauty" (317). But again, this recognition comes too late.

In the case of Lily—as well as Edna, Mrs. Sommers, and to some extent Kate Croy—the author seems to assert at least two things: first, that woman is she who plays the role of the woman; second, this is an existing role, women just need to take the script and perform it. Gender is indeed a matter of performance here, constructing the woman through a series of citational performative acts; her performance will have performative force in bringing about her womanhood. These performative acts of gender create indeed, as Butler claims, "the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all" (*Gender Trouble* 140); for gender is presented as "tenuously constituted [...] through a *stylized repetition of acts*" (140; emphasis in original). All these acts, furthermore, target the body, inscribing a variety of social signs onto it. Ultimately, gender evolves as the consequence of the performance of dressing as social scripting.

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