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Is Drag Morally Objectionable?

We are living through a golden age of drag, with drag kings and queens prominent in our society and media. Drag seems like fun, and a talk about drag in a department seminar may seem as if philosophy is enjoying a jolly time away from more serious topics. However, drag has a serious side. Some critics have recently accused drag of inherent sexism and misogyny, and this has extra bite in an age where concerns about cultural appropriation (and other, similar matters) are high. This talk will detail the challenge and argue that drag is not inherently morally objectionable.

Introduction and Aim

(a) Drag performance has been with us for centuries and occurs in many cultures, at least under certain descriptions.¹ It comes in a surprising variety of forms. Recent years have seen an explosion of drag into mainstream entertainment and social media, from professionals to amateurs of all ages, on various screens to round at your local pub or the opening of your local community centre. But drag raises a difficult issue, heightened by its current popularity. Some commentators think that drag belittles women in some fundamental way.² The question is:

- **Is drag morally objectionable?**

I detail the challenge below. **A warning:** note that race and the charge of 'womanface' come into view, which I also discuss. Things are going to get serious quite quickly.

(b) Later I set out different types of drag. Before that, here is a **working definition:**

¹ One could instantly start trying to distinguish a narrow sense of drag from a broader sense of 'cross-dressing performance'. I do not do so here, simply because the critics seem to challenge any male to female cross-dressing performances, although that is not always explicit. The challenge and discussion go through, I think, even if one narrows the definition. See Doonan (2019) and Senelick (2000) for comprehensive discussions of different forms of drag.

² If one distinguishes transwomen as an important category, one could also say that drag belittles transwomen; some people have on social media. I focus only on women in general here, and don't mark out any separate class, as the critics do. (It is fair to say that some critics who issue the challenge are probably not including transwomen in their account.)

Drag is an artistic performance, of either 'high' or 'low' art, in which gender roles are called into question, emphasized and/or celebrated, either as the prime focus of the performance, or as a secondary part of it. Performers use more or less outlandish imitation and performance, and sometimes (although not uniformly) employ exaggerated dress and style associated with norms of a particular gender.

This definition suffices to get things going, but it is (deliberately) deficient in at least one regard, which I raise in (t). Some drag performances and activity focus solely on artistic creation and arguably the focus is not on gender roles *at all*, even as a secondary feature.

(c) My aim is to argue that drag as a general category is not morally objectionable. There is nothing structural and inherent about drag that makes it objectionable because it belittles women in some way, even if some particular performances or personae are objectionable for this reason. As we discuss further, we will see what drag in fact is.

(d) There is a **wider context** to this talk, which I call 'the ethics of imitation'. (This paper is part of a broader project.) In brief: imitation, which here is standing in as a general term for a whole host of actions and attitudes – homage, copying, impersonation - is a deep-seated, everyday fact about human beings, both as individuals and groups, in all sorts of setting. Imitation undoubtedly has its positive effects; art and science progress because of it, businesses are efficient producers because of it, and so on. But there is a darker side too. Impersonations can upset people. People thief through infringements of copyright or through acts of plagiarism. Some individuals pretend to be from other groups in society, often innocently and sometimes involving forms of self-deception, but often with unwanted or devastating consequences. Many people are currently concerned about acts of cultural appropriation where people from one group ape or even steal aspects of the culture of another group, where this act may silence those in the group suffering the appropriation or alter in damaging ways people's views of the group. There is more to say about each sort of example (and many others), and there is more to say about various distinctions to be drawn to help understand some example categories. (We have deep waters here: deception, offence and harm, freedom of expression.) There is a need, I think, for philosophers to understand the ethical and normative contours of all forms of imitation: what they are, how they link or don't link to each other, which forms of imitation are morally permissible and impermissible, and which forms should be encouraged, and why.

Drag will involve performance, but rarely straightforward deception. It is controversial because some people are offended and, whether or not people are offended, critics think that drag performance constitutes a type of harm. With that said, let's get on to the challenge.

The Challenge

(e) There are no philosophy journal articles on drag as far as I am aware. All sources I use are from other subject areas or are from op-ed columns in newspapers and magazines. Part of what I am doing in this talk is trying to make sense of what the challenge is exactly. The following is typical:

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. Kleiman (2000), p. 669.

As Kleiman does here, and as other commentators do, for the moment I will assume that 'drag' refers only to men dressing up and performing as women. Indeed, that is part of the issue. We'll come back to that assumption later.

(f) According to the challenge, or from what I can construct, drag in general is born of hostility and has serious, negative consequences.

- That hostility may be intended. If it is, then this is a particularly serious harm. However, intention is not so important. One can harm without intention. Indeed, one can harm even from the best of intentions. A drag performer may simply be wanting to entertain but by their actions they can harm others. (The point about intention is made in passing by Kathleen Stock in her (2019).)
- What sort of harm? To understand that, let's first discuss *offence*. Some people may be offended by drag in general. They may find the idea of men dressing up as women disgusting or morally degrading. There is something inherently wrong about it. Certain fundamentalist religious believers come to mind here.
 - But, Kleiman, Stock and others do not talk in this manner. The very idea, the bald idea, of men dressing up as women and then performing is not seen as wrong because this very act offends.
 - What critics do often point out is that individual performances – be it one-off performances or particular personae that performers adopt – are offensive, that is they are such as to offend (reasonable) people, whether or not there is intention.
 - We can agree with this. I have seen drag performances I consider offensive (whether or not I have *felt* offended).
 - But in the individual cases which are such as to cause offence, often they are such that the stereotype is morally or aesthetically awful in some way, and perhaps we are into the zone of 'insult and ridicule'. If we are into that zone we are moving out of 'purely' offending people, I think, and into 'harm'. Ridicule and insult are types of bullying. Indeed, from this short discussion, I don't think we advance anything by thinking in terms of people being offended. We need to think about types of harm.

(g) What sorts of harm? I think there are two main ones.

(i) **INSULT and RIDICULE:** explicitly making fun of women in general, or particular types of women, or individual women. This ‘making fun’ may be intended with a nasty edge, but it may be unintended and may even be intended as playful, but the effect could be the same. The woman or women may be ridiculed in their eyes and the eyes of other parties.

(ii) **DENIAL of AGENCY:** through drag performances, either individual ones or, more likely, through general drag culture and the routine depictions of women, women are denied full agency. (Kleiman’s “prescriptions of desired behaviour”.) The depictions are ways in which some men say and/or show how women should be seen. Such depictions then affect and control how society treats women and how some women themselves behave.

This is given extra force by an important factor. Men are already in control: despite some honourable societal exceptions, men have been in power in most societies in history, certainly in modern times. Drag helps to cement this power imbalance. Indeed, given that this is the societal background against which drag develops, then drag itself can be seen as a type of ‘punching down’: a way in which those in power or who are in a position to take advantage of certain power dynamics, can ridicule or control (or be seen to ridicule and control) those with less power. Even if drag performers do not intend any of this, drag is part of the problem, not the solution.

(h) Section (g) was a little abstract. What sorts of depiction might harm? What sorts of consequence might ensue?

(I) Depictions. Think about all the stereotypes – the nag, the harpy, the catty glamour puss, the dumb blonde, the power-crazed Amazon, the battle-axe mother-in-law, etc. - which straightforwardly ridicule women, most or all of whom are not as depicted. We have parodies that can and do tip into bullying. Drag often uses these or other stereotypes.

(Note the challenge is dealing with moral criticism. One can also criticize on aesthetic grounds although here things get murky. I am quite open-minded about using stereotypes in theatrical performance. Some performers and writers may use stereotypes and find them aesthetically useful or illuminating ways to explore character, by being able to offer contrast at surprising moments for example. Sometimes using stereotypes is just aesthetically dull or objectionable. But our focus is on the moral, not the aesthetic.)

(II) Harmful consequences. There may be individual performances, using stereotypes or anything else, individual performance may ridicule. But, more generally, Kleiman, Stock *et al* are interested in the ways in which drag performance in general limits women’s options, hence **DENIAL of AGENCY**. There are plenty of examples here.

- We can think about cases across many hundreds of years and many centuries where women have been denied positions of power. Society will have certain expectations of women, as will women themselves. Drag is not the worst evil here, surely, but it is part of the general culture that seeks to do women down and limit their possibilities by influencing what society, including some women, think of as normal female roles.

- A more specific example. Think about women’s fashion, and trends in clothing and make-up. Arguably these have been heavily influenced in the past few years by drag culture. Kim Kardashian may have influenced contouring a lot, but then so have male drag queens. And contouring takes up a lot of time and energy, and money. Some make-up routines can take an hour to 90 minutes, and doing it every day severely hampers what women can do. The issue is that some women may feel the pressure to adopt such routines so as to look perfect or acceptable, and that will limit what they can do in their lives. In contrast, women that shun such fashions may feel under pressure to conform or face certain discrimination. Again, drag may not be the main evil here, perhaps worse are the fashion and cosmetics industries, but, so the criticism goes, drag isn’t helping. (For more on beauty in general, see Widdows (2020).)

(i) ‘Inherent and general’. Something to underline. Notice that in the examples just given, and any others we can think of, the nature of a typical individual drag performance or performer is not at issue. Just being part of the drag scene means you are part of the problem. There is something wrong in general – i.e. with many or all forms of drag – because there is something inherently wrong in its structure.

But I said earlier that there does not seem to be anything morally wrong with men dressing as women, some fundamentalist religious believers aside. No critics seem that fussed by this. Rather, when they target drag as being inherently and/or generally morally objectionable they are after something else. It is often hard to say exactly what they have in mind, but it seems to be this. Drag is not just men appearing as women and performing on a stage or a screen. Rather it is the *ways* in which they perform. And there *have to be* ways in which one performs, otherwise one is not a performer. The tropes and stereotypes, the ways of appearing, all have to make the man into a woman in some way, and that can become parody of various sorts: sometimes humorous, sometimes mocking. Even in the most sensitive treatment, one is aping and playing to a certain way in which the femininity is to be portrayed. In the very best, morally acceptable performances, what does one get from a man playing a role rather than a woman, apart from the cheap thrill of seeing if he can do it? So, now a new criticism, even in those cases of sensitive performance we have a problem. A man playing a female part means exclusion for a female performer, who may need the work and the exposure.

Note that at the end of Stock (2019), Stock does imagine in passing the possibility of non-misogynistic drag, but it is clear that she thinks that most if not all modern drag performances are misogynistic either by design or because they are part of a larger problematic artform.

(j) In summary, then, drag – men dressing and performing as women – is morally objectionable (i.e. morally wrong) because it is harmful, where the harm can run from ridicule to a denial of full agency. No matter what the intention of individual performers, there is something inherently and generally wrong with drag because of the fact that men (who belong to a powerful group in society) portray women (who are often not as powerful) and because of how they portray women.

(k) The preceding challenge is sometimes made vivid in the following way. Consider ‘blackface’, ‘yellowface’ and the like. People in one race dress up as people of another race. But there is more to it than that. We have the insults, the denial of agency, the degrading stereotypes, and the power relations mentioned above. At the very least, even if done with the best of intentions, we feel highly morally disquieted by blackface, but at its worst we should and do feel horrified. Given that the reasons for blackface being wrong are the same as the reasons for drag being wrong, then we should similarly feel morally queasy and/or outraged about drag as we do about blackface. Hence why the term ‘womanface’ is used in commentary pieces on the topic. Blackface is racist. Drag is sexist and misogynistic. The former is now, rightly, a cultural and performance ‘no-go’ area. Why not the latter?

First Responses

In this section I work within the assumptions of the Challenge. In the next section I challenge those.

(l) I think we can accept the following:

(i) Some people may find the very idea of drag performance inherently offensive, but they are in a small minority as I have already indicated.

(ii) Some people find particular drag performances and/or personae offensive, and they may be right to do so if and when particular cases illegitimately ridicule and abuse women or certain sorts of women. These are harms and are morally objectionable.

(iii) Drag may help, in general, to cement certain forms of control that women, or types of women, are subject to.

(iv) There are power relations in societies and women in general and types of women are very often less powerful than men or types of men.

But notice that these are phrased with words such as ‘may’. Responses to these points are available.

(m) First, one can call into question, (l) (iii): just how influential is drag? It might be morally objectionable, but is it *very* objectionable? If its influence is negative but slight, then is that sufficient for us to stop performing and enjoying drag? Does its negative moral value outweigh its (positive) entertainment and artistic value? Might it also have some moral goods?

That debate could carry on and on. I will leave this response there, if only because drag may have a positive moral effect which I discuss later. The challenge and this response may give us reason not to stop drag, but to think about which forms are acceptable.

(n) Let’s think about (l) (ii) and (iv).

Here’s something in response to (ii) specifically. There is an opposing view, which doesn’t so much deny the fact that men dress up and perform as women, and deny that they perform in

certain ways, but uses this inherent fact to make a contrary point. In short, through dint of their performance male drag queens are subverting various ideas about gender, gender binaries themselves often being oppressive and harmful in certain ways. Not just is this a hypothetical point about what drag can be, this is pretty much what drag often has been and is. There are *plenty* of historic examples, so much so that some might argue that this is also inherent in and intrinsic to the artform of *drag* (as opposed to ‘misogynistic impersonation of women’). Drag should also be viewed positively.

What of (iv)? It is all very well talking of ‘men impersonating women’ but often the men doing the impersonations are gay, bisexual or non-binary. (Just by being drag queens, no matter what their sexual orientation or view of their gender, they may be marginalised members of society.) They were and are very often not the most powerful people in society. Drag has often been a form of queer empowerment, if only because it is a form of queer association and a source of supportive community. It has also been used to empower women and other oppressed groups in society, such as racial and ethnic minorities. Think of drag queens in 1960s USA and other Western societies. They often found common cause with some in black and other communities during the notable civil rights demonstrations of that era. (I say ‘some’. There was and is plenty of homophobia in black communities. Black male drag queens were and are ‘doubly’ oppressed.)

(o) I have put the previous two responses together because they often do go together. Drag is seen by many feminist and queer writers, such as Judith Butler, as a way of being positive about women and finding ways for various groups to try to advance certain causes. Stock puts the point well and then responds with a counter.

Some in the gender studies field argue that drag queens positively “queer” gender: that is, they subvert otherwise rigid cultural binaries that would put men and masculinity on one side, and women and femininity on the other, and assign heterosexuality to both of them. The philosopher Judith Butler argues (jargon alert): “Parodic proliferation deprives hegemonic culture and its critics of the claim to naturalised or essentialist gender identities.” Yet drag has been around for millennia, and the binaries still look pretty stable to me. Far from drag queens making it more acceptable for men to exhibit femininity, in the UK at least it seems rather to have become more acceptable for young women to look like drag queens. I am not sure if that is much of an advance.

A further problem with Butler’s thesis is that contemporary drag queens tend to aim for humour, and humour is often highly conservative. Many jokes depend on shared norms between the performer’s persona and the audience, in order to subvert those norms for comic effect. But usually the subversion is only temporary, and purely instrumental—to produce the belly laugh, leaving the norms untouched, and arguably even reinforced by the enjoyably cathartic experience. The laugh reveals, at least to others, if not to its owner, the structure of prejudices but does not challenge them. Much laughter towards drag queens depends on, and simultaneously nurtures, the attitude

that a man can be made to look preposterous by dressing up as a woman, but not vice versa. Stock (2019).

A number of thoughts from me in response to Stock's counter.

(i) Drag has been around for centuries and the binaries still look cemented. Yes, and also no. There are some cultures (in Central and Latin America, in SE Asia, for example) where binaries have shifted and where various third sex and cross-dressing cultures and communities have been and are cemented and perpetuated. Is this all down to artistic drag? No. But, similarly....

(ii) ...one could ask in response why would one expect drag alone to overturn whatever power dynamics there are, and to be the only or main thing perpetuating them. On this point I think both Butler *et al*, and Stock, Kleiman *et al*, overstate the case. Drag is pretty marginal, I think. So, even if one can argue about how morally objectionable or liberating drag is, both sides may be putting more weight on the phenomena than is justified, and in doing so overlooking what drag predominantly is, namely a playful, constantly evolving artistic phenomenon. (Of which more below.) So, whether one thinks drag in general is objectionable or heroic, we might need to think about it in proportion. If drag can be described with either label, one probably has in mind particular forms or sub-cultures of drag, capturing and expressing a certain cultural moment.

(iii) Stock may be right to say that modern male drag queens have helped (perhaps unintentionally) to increase young women's and teenage girls' desire to look more like drag queens. So I (partly) concede the point from above, in (h). However, first I would still ask how much influence drag has in this regard. Also, some drag queens argue that drag subverts key assumptions we make about modern beauty and the attendant industries. Some people in a drag audience realise that no matter how pretty, gorgeous or glamorous a drag queen looks, a lot of it is down to (a lot of) make-up, and underneath it all they are just a man in a dress. What appears beautiful here can be acknowledged by the audience as fake, and that thought may be applied by them to many or all other instances. That thought is very subversive. (See Cheddar Gorgeous, from 15.50 in *Netflix* (2021).)

Third, I think that Stock is simply wrong to imply that this is the only or main effect. I go on YouTube and TikTok *a lot* and am part of a number of Facebook groups devoted to drag. The main effect I see is a genuine increase in confidence from many people. There are many young men and teenage boys confidently playing with their appearance and gender in a very open and public manner, and in a way that would have been unthinkable a generation ago or even a decade ago. In fact, I would go so far as to say that there has been an *explosion* of this activity.

(p) So, my response to Stock and other critics regarding the harms and power relations of drag (particularly its current, Western incarnation), is that the evidence points both ways. There is a lot of 'drag-like' activity. Some girls and women end up being influenced by drag

and that can have a negative dimension because they are spending more time on make-up and fashion, and think they have to, and this is oppressive in some (mild?) way. But then so are many boys and men. But, as a counter, across all ages and genders, there is a lot of celebration and expression going on as well. At this point one can call into question how oppressed *everyone* is. Surely some people are making choices, as much as anyone can in any circumstance, which are relatively free of diktat from their culture.

My conclusion here is that the point about 'drag is bad because of its intrinsic structures' is *inconclusive* or, if one prefers, it's a score draw. I think there is something here. I find some male drag queen performances morally disturbing in some fashion, because they may be harmful in some way. Clearly, men performing as women can enable certain particularly objectionable performances and sub-cultures. But drag's very structure allows people to do the opposite and allow for celebration of who we are and to subvert other things that have proved oppressive in society for some, such as strict gender binaries. There are plenty of drag performances that celebrate women and femininity and there are plenty of positive things to say about drag, as we will see. And anyway.....

Second Responses

(q) Have the critics got a good idea of what drag is?

So far we have been thinking only of male drag queens. I said at the start I would give some other types. Here are five:

(i) male drag queens; (ii) female drag kings; (iii) male drag kings; (iv) female drag queens; (v) those people who are uncomfortable with any gender label who perform in 'drag' by adopting the fashion norms (etc.) associated with a particular gender.

There is a lot to say about these categories and about having such categories anyway. How do performance and gender interact? How should we conceive of gender in the first place? Drag is interesting as an artform in part because it calls attention to these types of question. (See my (almost certainly) problematic wording for (v).) I don't address these questions here. I am merely indicating that if we are to categorize and discuss drag, we need to think about more than just male drag queens.

This introduces two main types of response to the challenge.

(r) The first type of response is obvious. The challenge above is to drag, where this is interpreted narrowly as 'male drag queens'. What happens if we change that assumption? We might ask different sorts of question, such as:

- Are female drag kings morally objectionable or as objectionable as male drag queens?
- Is there is such a thing as 'manface'?

Kleiman (2000) p. 683 says that:

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.³

So for this reason, the issue of ‘manface’ and of female drag kings doing anything morally wrong doesn’t arise. The power relations are so different. If anything, we should be cheering on the female drag kings as well as booing the male drag queens.

Similarly, Stock (2019) argues that:

The central question is whether drag’s modern, Western, humorous incarnation has a misogynistic, mocking cultural meaning. I think it does. As with blackface, a fundamental source of humour operates independently of any wittiness, observation, or timing. Namely: a white person as a black person, or a man as a woman, is found by audiences to be hilariously incongruent, given the presumed superior social status of the performers relative to the “inferior” groups they respectively impersonate. The temporary, assumed degradation of a performer’s status is in itself funny. This explains why drag kings—women performing as men—or black people playing white people, are not usually found funny at first sight, though witty or well-observed material may make them so. It also explains the outcome of the following thought experiment: for any given drag performance, an identical performance, though this time given by what the audience knew to be a woman underneath equally heavy make-up and sequins, would not be as funny.

We have already discussed power dynamics. Again, the dynamics at work in drag through the ages and into modern times look different if one is talking about gay men or men who are part of some other marginalized group. Similarly, I would return to the thought that drag, whoever is performing it, can encourage positive outcomes by undermining some of the existing dynamics at work. But I don’t want to overstress the point. The power dynamics at play favour men over women, and some gay men have been and are insulting towards women.

³ Quoting Woodhouse (1989), p. 145.

But further to these existing points, I think Stock is plain wrong to say that the drag kings (by which she means, female drag kings) are not funny at first sight, made funny only by the material and performance. Plenty of modern female comics – French and Saunders, Kathy Burke as Perry in the sketches by her and Harry Enfield, etc. – look on immediate viewing as incongruous and as funny (or not as funny) as any equivalents amongst famous cross-dressing male performers. Similarly, less high-profile performers, be they professional or amateur, are as incongruous and immediately funny (or not) as male drag queens. (That is true whatever the persona and stereotype, be it one created as a new character or a straightforward impersonation, such as Elvis Presley or a US President.) This is as true today as it was in the UK's Victorian and Edwardian music halls. Stock and I may disagree about this, but then we are into the realms of taste, not discussing matters that are intrinsic and structural to drag artforms. After all, there are plenty of male drag queens who I view not as initially funny because they are incongruous. My initial reaction looking at some male drag queens – and surely I can't be alone – is how straightforwardly *glamorous* they are. More often than not I don't have any reaction of incongruity. That may be part of the difference between some professional, much practiced drag queens and, say, most pantomime dames who *are* aiming for incongruity with pretty much every performance and costume.

What of female drag queens? Kleiman doesn't have anything to say about them. I am not surprised. Note that Kleiman published her paper in 2000. Whilst female drag queens existed before – and I am sure there would be some cultural theorists who would be prepared to say that some Hollywood stars from the golden era (for example, Mae West) were heavily influenced by drag culture and appearance – there has been a large increase in the number and profile of female drag queens in the past decade. In short, what we have are women taking on exaggerated female appearance primarily for performance art, self-identifying as part of the drag scene. They are enjoying, experimenting and revelling in their performance taking on exaggerated appearances. In so doing, many are pushing boundaries of performance, of appearance, and of how audiences think when they hear the phrase 'drag queen'.

For instance, here is an interesting interview by Tessa Vikander in 2019 with Bracken Hanke, a then 12 year old, female 'hyper' queen:

Hanke is one of a small but growing group of people who were assigned as female at birth and also dress up as drag queens. Called hyper queens, they tap into society's expectations of women, and like other drag queens, they dress up as women and exaggerate their appearance and behaviour to mimic socially-defined ideas of femininity. "I'm hyper feminizing," Hanke said. "You take elements of what is known as the stereotypical female and you dial them up by a hundred-thousand-million-trillion."

For Hanke, performing as a queen is empowering and she enjoys the creativity behind it. "It gives me more confidence, it makes me feel proud and empowered to be representing females, but also putting a weird twist on it ... (and) it gets my brain going. I love costume design."

Her advice to others who are interested in drag is to “just go for it. Drag is really limitless and there’s no set idea on what drag is, there’s no right or wrong, it doesn’t matter who you are, what age you are, what you look like, what parts you have, it’s just about expression and being who you are.”

Are female drag queens morally objectionable, or should we be cheering them on? Are they unwittingly contributing to a morally objectionable power dynamic that insults and denies agency to women, or are they intentionally undermining such a dynamic and subverting our ideas of gender norms, as per Butler’s point? This is now all getting a bit complicated. This takes us to a different response.

(s) Drag is an evolving and dynamic artform. Like all artforms it can be problematic. But there is nothing intrinsically bad about drag, or worse about drag, than one finds in other artforms. If one is worried about drag – specifically male to female drag queens – one should also be worried about parodies and imitations (as many types and tokens through the ages and in cultures as one likes) concerning age, class, geography, and other matters.⁴

Recall my earlier comment that ‘drag’ now encompasses a range of forms, continuous with one another, and blending together: professional male drag queens touring regional gay pubs; avant-garde bearded drag queens influencing many in the art world; young female drag queens with thousands of TikTok followers; female drag queens and non-binary contestants on *Drag Race*; male and female comics dressing up on a sketch shows; pantomime dames and many other cultural mainstays around the world; and there then follows a large ‘etc.’. Whilst some drag performers might well privilege gender and stereotypes, others do not and in some parts of the drag world expression of anything to do with gender is not at all the focus. This is all ‘drag’.

Stock also says, towards the end of her (2019):

Performers can and do use creativity and intelligence to try to work subversively against drag’s inbuilt reactionary grain. To that end, they may call upon its long, rich history for inspiration, to quote or satirise. (As RuPaul has said: “I don’t dress like a woman, I dress like a drag queen”.) The fact remains, though, that in uncreative hands, drag collapses all too quickly into “look at the silly man in the dress”; with an accompanying persistent undertone of “aren’t women silly?”

To be clear, as I hope is now obvious, I don’t agree with the implication about an inbuilt reactionary grain: or, at least, what inbuilt grains there are can be seen both positively and negatively. But, what Stock and I do agree on is the creative potential of drag. I would change

⁴ For example, I’m born and bred in Dudley. Plenty of advertisements in the UK and beyond use characters with regional accents to make implicit points, conveyed immediately, about their products. My natural, Black Country accent (and the very similar Brummie accent) is often used in the UK to convey that a character is a slow-minded, dull-witted idiot, who is often the butt of a joke in the advert. See also: Scousers and Mancs as dodgy thieves, Cockneys as cheeky monkeys, wise West Country folk knowing more than rich Townies about fields and muck, and people with a soft Edinburgh or Borders burr being careful with your money.

the emphasis, however. I think drag the artform is endlessly creative and has evolved over the years; it isn't just individual performers who are creative. Perhaps one could even argue that in the past fifty years or so, drag has been more subversive than other artforms. I suppose this is what gave Butler and others inspiration for their view. Certainly if one views drag as more than just 'a bloke in a dress', and considers other points, such as the point from above about the 1960s civil rights movement, and realizes that these overt political stances came out of the artform and helped it to evolve further rather than being simply coincidental, then one can see drag as central to social subversion and, indeed, inspiring. Consider a modern example. In an interview in *Pink News* with Lily Wakefield in 2021 Ginny Lemon, a contestant who quit during the second series of *RuPaul's Drag Race UK*, said:

"It was getting so pedestrian, so boring, and, you know, it needed to be shaken up and stood on its arse. And that was part of my job as a drag performer to do." Before season two of RuPaul's Drag Race UK, Ginny Lemon said there was "such a generic form of drag that was kind of being represented on that show. It was basically, you know, hip pads, tits, contour, this and that, going for a very hyper-feminine female illusion, which is, you know, frankly quite outdated in 2021, it's quite misogynistic," they said. "I just didn't want to see these kind of cookie-cutter drag queens that I was seeing, you know. I wanted some queer art, not just people prancing around and having a laugh. I mean, that's all great and well done, but there are some truly talented performers out there who haven't got that platform."

The conclusion here is that drag is an evolving artform. Just like many others it can encompass bad performances and good performances, both artistically and morally. It has the power to change society for good or ill. That applies to how it reacts to, uses and expresses gender and gender roles.

(t) This brings us to one final point in this section. We have thought about whether there is something intrinsic about drag which makes it harmful. We have also thought about power structures. We have discussed lack of agency. And we have got onto the topic of creativity. In all these topics I can't see a compelling reason to think that drag in general and in conclusion is morally objectionable, even if some performers and performances might be, just as in any other artform.

The (near) throwaway quotation above that Stock gives from RuPaul is worth pausing on, and something I have been building to. RuPaul says he isn't dressing as a woman but is dressing as a drag queen. Perhaps drag is or has got to the point where we (or some) see it not as men dressing up as women – with all the concomitant worries about impersonation and power relations – but as an artform where people perform as drag queens and kings. That is a subtle but a hugely important difference. This is, anecdotally, something that really

resonates with a lot of young performers and fans. Drag is seen as its *own form of life*, as philosophers might pompously call it. Looked at through a different lens, drag queens – including male drag queens – are better seen as clowns than as impersonators of women/men. Perhaps they are not expressing what they think women are like at all, and try hard not to perpetuate stereotypes. Perhaps, instead, they are expressing facets of themselves and being artistically playful. And, in that way, individual performers and performances can be successful or unsuccessful, and morally acceptable or objectionable, as any artform. There isn't anything intrinsically objectionable here and much to be admired.

From this point, we can open our frames of reference. Earlier I drew attention to male drag kings. Perhaps this form has very few examples or perhaps very many. Are we looking at male drag queens as performing to impersonate women or viewing them as people who are simply playing around with character? If the former, then professional male drag kings are a small group indeed. If the latter, we have a *huge* number of examples. We simply have men taking on all sorts of male personae and perpetuating stereotypes or whatever else all the time, and doing so in better or worse ways.

Here's a UK example.⁵ If the *Two Ronnies* are 'in drag' as two women from the Women's Institute singing a range of parody songs, perhaps they are not doing anything dissimilar when singing and dressed as a couple of binmen or male voice choir members or male vicars. Any particular performance may be objectionable, but is that something structural based on gender impersonation? The point about power relations may come back – class, age, disability and geography (for example) matter also – but sometimes we just have some fun with people playing characters, and they may do this more or less well as artists and it may be more or less morally acceptable. And just as women may feel pressure to conform to certain types, because of certain stereotypes in social play, so the same may be true of men having to live up to certain ideas of what it means to be a man or what it means to be a vicar or to be Welsh. The issue then is whether drag is objectionable, or whether it is stereotypes (or certain stereotypes, or people's overuse and unthinking acceptance of them) that are morally objectionable. Vicars, I am sure, get annoyed or even insulted by how some people portray them. There is a big difference between the 1970s comical portrayal of vicars by, say, Dick Emery, Derek Nimmo and Dave Allen. There is more difference still between those and the sympathetic portrayal by Tom Hollander in *Rev*.⁶

⁵ There are plenty of others, UK and otherwise: *Monty Python, Saturday Night Live, Kids in the Hall.....*

⁶ What might be the aesthetic-cum-moral differences here? (Here are some personal reflections.) I pick on Dick Emery since many of his characters seem to be parodies where types are picked on simply for a laugh. Arguably some of his characters are picked out with scorn and designed to make fun of them directly. Other performers and writers may not do that. Dave Allen's portrayal had some measure of scorn but, given his overall act, arguably the anger and scepticism was directed at religion as such and the structures of organized religion. Some of his stories and performances exhibited some warm sympathy for individual figures, but by no means all. *Rev* is a more subtle and sympathetic take on what it is to be a vicar in modern Britain. Similarly, Les Dawson and Roy Barraclough's Ada and Cissie characters were an obviously affectionate portrayal of a certain sort of Northern working class woman, even if one or other was normally the butt of a joke. Dawson and Barraclough used the characters / stereotypes to explore a range of situations and emotions, and through performance

This point is reinforced by something I have mentioned throughout: the many different forms of drag – now and (somewhat) throughout history – should make you question the conception of the thing that is found so morally objectionable. Are drag queens impersonating others or are they expressing themselves? Any particular example may do one or the other or may do both. The same is true of the artform in general.⁷

Womanface and Blackface

(u) Miz Cracker, a high-profile American drag queen (real name Maxwell Heller) wrote a very reflective piece in 2015, thinking about the issues above and about the specific charge of ‘womanface’, stimulated by a post on Twitter by Mary Cheney. Here’s an excerpt:

For some perspective on this controversy, I spoke with W. Fitzhugh Brundage, chair of the Department of History at UNC-Chapel Hill, and editor of a fascinating book on black representation in American pop culture, Beyond Blackface. “My immediate response,” Brundage said, “is that Cheney’s comments show very little understanding of blackface as a historical phenomenon.” One major problem with Cheney’s comparison, he explained, was the yawning gap between the immense cultural influence of blackface at its height and the comparatively low visibility of drag, even in its present RuPaul-sponsored golden age. “In the 1840s, anyone in even a moderate-sized American city had access to minstrelsy, and the rest had access to it through sheet music,” Brundage said. “It was an incredibly pervasive cultural phenomenon. Drag has never enjoyed that cultural weight.” Even if drag were harmful, its impact on American perceptions of women has been so negligible relative to that of blackface that any comparison is foolish. More important, there’s a profound difference in the power dynamics of the two forms of entertainment. “Minstrelsy was being performed by whites in positions of cultural and local power, whereas drag is performed by a marginalized group who are subject to fear and repression,” Brundage said. “To be a drag queen is not an act of privilege. It’s just not comparable.” Cracker (2015)

Domenick Scudera (a Professor of Drama and Theatre and an occasional drag queen) addresses the issue, and Cheney’s version of it, head on. He says, echoing Brundage:

Drag is a celebration. Drag is an attitude. Today’s drag queen is often a gay man who has embraced that part of himself that, as a child, was considered shameful and undeserving. Rather than allowing himself to be bullied, he has revealed that hidden aspect of himself, dressed her up, made her fabulous and

indicated that these everyday women would get through life no matter what it threw at them. (Arguably, class and geography were as much a feature of the sketches as gender was.) Emery’s female characters were not like this. Similarly, compare with very recent assessments of the UK show, *Little Britain*. Thanks to Sophie-Grace Chappell for discussion here.

⁷ Smith (2019) makes similar points to those raised in this section.

invincible. He has found strength in her and wears her like a shield. Drag is some of the best parts of who he is, magnified and impervious.

A blackface performer is dressing up the ugliest parts of himself: the racist, belittling, superior parts of himself. This ugliness is worn on his face for the amusement of others like him. Scudera (2017)

Scudera goes on to reflect on the history of drag (long-lived, much expressed, a huge variety of expression), and black and white minstrelsy being relatively short-lived and, in the US at least, coming out of quite particular power structures. He talks of the respect that many male drag queens have for women in general and the women in their lives, and contrasts that with the lack of respect blackface performers have for people of a different race who they are impersonating.

I agree with a lot of this, although I do bring a qualifier. Scudera focuses on the US experience of blackface, which is inextricably tied to the moral evil and scars of slavery. That very fact makes it near-impossible to see blackface in the US and elsewhere as anything other than morally objectionable. But we should note that dressing up as people from different racial and ethnic groups has happened before slavery and continues today with different historic roots. However, what I think Scudera and Brundage get right in general is that the history of dressing up as different racial and ethnic groups is often because the group is a minority or is lacking in power, and is often done to mock them in some fashion. So much so that any individual performance is working against a huge moral tide, no matter how sensitive an individual portrayal is. The example of drag is far less clear-cut than this simply because drag itself and many drag performers have been challenging the status quo and championing the social underdog in many societies, and most of the time drag performers *have been* the underdog. Or, in other words, there is enough in the political and social history, and therefore in the current expression of drag, to say that there is a large gap between minstrelsy and drag, between blackface and so-called womanface.⁸

In saying that, some points come to the fore. The first I have already made but I want to make it again, slightly recast. In *one sense* there is nothing wrong with performing with a *literal* black face. (Note - please - the italics and the space between 'black' and 'face'.) It is just someone who is not black (often Caucasian) putting on some stage make-up and performing. If that is all that we were judging, one might be far more relaxed, just as one might judge someone performing with a blue face or a green face. Similarly, one might say there is nothing wrong with any performer donning the garb and appearance of someone from a different gender. But as we know, black and white minstrelsy and other forms of racial impersonation are *very different* from that, very different from performing with a green or a blue face. Black and white minstrelsy and other forms of blackface come from particular periods and motivations where people of power impersonated people of less power and

⁸ I have focused on minstrelsy, but similar comments can be made about many other forms where people from one race or ethnic group imitate those of another.

created stereotypes which they used to denigrate and insult and do so systematically as part of particular social and historic evil. Indeed, this happened so often in the history of blackface that any dressing up with black face paint *has* to be judged in this way first and foremost. The cultural and social history from which modern blackface emerged cannot be disentangled from white people dressing up and performing as black people. Drag can't be judged in the way say, since its history is different.

Secondly and following on, right at the end of her short piece, straight after acknowledging the possibility of drag performers subverting the inbuilt reactionary grain, Stock says:

If there can be non-misogynist drag, then the door is left open, in some distant but possible world, for a performance in blackface to challenge and genuinely subvert the racism in which actual cases of blackface, in our actual world, are thoroughly grounded. Those who reject this suggestion as outrageous need to explain why creative recuperation is eternally impossible for blackface, but not for drag. And the answer can't simply be "because misogyny's fine, but racism isn't".

I have just made the case for thinking (or at least indicated a starting point for thinking) that drag is different, because the social history is different. I also think Stock and others such as Kleiman and Cheney go far too quickly from 'here is an imitation which is morally objectionable, and here is a second that seems structurally similar' to 'therefore this second imitation must also be morally objectionable'. We will end up soon ruling out as morally objectionable many forms of imitation, such as 'classface', 'oldface', 'youngface', 'vicarface', etc. and do so on the basis of what is inherent or structural about them, not what is objectionable about any particular performance. Racism and sexism are wrong. But to make the charge of womanface stick to drag in general, one has to do more than just say on paper it is similar to or the same as blackface.

The third point is that in the two forms we have looked at – gender and race – it isn't just about the literal appearance. As with many artworks, the history of the form affects, sometimes directly, what the artform actually is, its contours, and its possibilities. Drag can be seen as a type of clowning around, but it is more than that. So the metaphilosophical question I end with is this. When raising the questions 'Is drag (generally) morally objectionable?' and 'Is drag (generally) 'womanface'?' can we answer these questions ahistorically and apolitically? Can we simply and only judge the literal garb and appearance? My answer is a clear 'no'. We can ask these questions only if we understand the artform, and we can do that only if we understand its history and how it arose and has evolved, and what performers did within the artform.⁹ This gives us the clearest way of saying what made blackface bad and what makes drag (in general) morally acceptable, even if some individual drag performances may be harmful.¹⁰

⁹ In fact, I think that goes for many or any artforms.

¹⁰ One final point. Earlier I emphasized the interesting nature of female drag queens, and the positive force they may be. But, there were black performers that performed in minstrel shows, either as

Concluding Thoughts

(v) Here's Miz Cracker again, writing in 2015 with her concluding thoughts:

So what's to be done? Here's my proposal: In the same way that many queens listened to the transgender community's concerns last year over use of controversial terms like tranny within drag culture, we can listen to women this year. Without chilling drag's wonderful tradition of free expression, we can take this moment to ask if our drag personae and performances truly celebrate feminine gender expressions, or if they lazily mock them. I know that this kind of sensitivity is possible, because some queens are already excelling at it. Just last week, I saw Brooklyn queen Lady Bearica Andrews perform a number in which she literally threw off the marionette strings of domesticity to become an independent woman. It's rare and risky for a queen to create work that so directly addresses women's issues, but the audience was on its feet, screaming. Judging from that experience, I don't think that listening to women's concerns will hurt us. In fact, I think it may make our drag even richer.

And she's right. I think the challenge of womanface and the concern that drag is such as to attract morally objectionable performances is onto something. Despite the positive noises I have made, I have admitted throughout that there are some morally objectionable performances and performers, as does Miz Cracker. What we need to do is to encourage the positive performances and not be afraid to call out the negative ones, thus reinforcing the power of drag. Sometimes drag just is a bloke in a dress. But sometimes it is more, much more, than that. It needs to be viewed in that way and performers and others need to ensure it retains the power to do good.¹¹

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themselves or by blacking up. Let's imagine, as I think is true, that made things morally worse, not better. That, on paper, looks to be exactly the same thing that is going on with female drag queens. Again, I think the point can be addressed by the different social histories of minstrelsy and other racial impersonations, and of drag.

¹¹ Thanks to XXX for discussion.

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