

# Men In Skirts

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Gender and fashion are paraphrases of each other. Clothes are arbitrary, superficial and mutable in their form and yet an indispensable feature in the definition of a human being in culture. Definitions of gender are similarly various in the forms which they can take, always subject, it seems, to the unremitting demand that *there be* gender.

These and the following reflections have been provoked by the small, thoughtful exhibition which could be seen in the Costume Gallery of the Victoria and Albert Museum in London from 8 February to 12 May 2002. 'Men In Skirts' was a showpiece for the work of a number of contemporary designers who are encouraging men to adopt different forms of the skirt. This is not the first such attempt. Jacques Esterel marketed a natty checked skirt-suit in 1966, though the skirt part of it was a rather faint-hearted affair, being composed of Bermuda shorts with a flap drawn over the front to give the impression of a skirt.<sup>1</sup> It was Jean-Paul Gaultier who led the way in skirts for men during the 1990s, the look being endorsed by David Beckham, the most famous man in the world, as I write, when he turned out for dinner in a sarong. Drawing deeply on the provocation, wit and travesty of pop music style, especially in punk and grunge, Gaultier's were the most radical and the most beautiful ideas in the V&A exhibition. A display board instructed visitors that Gaultier 'presents men with a means of escaping the confines of traditional male apparel and, at the same time, a means of escaping the confines of traditional male roles and stereotypes'. Rather than using the skirt to transform masculinity, other designers in the exhibition, like Ozwald Boateng, Paul Smith, Carlo Pignatelli and Philippe Dubuc, wanted instead to reassure their customers of the naturalness of wearing skirts. Many of their designs draw encouragement and example from the many forms of skirted male apparel common outside Europe, such as the North African caftan or djellaba, the South-East Asian sarong and the Indian dhoti, not to mention the hyper-masculinity of the kilt, with its military associations and its stabilisation by the heavy socks, sturdy shoes and closely-tailored jackets which are its prescribed accompaniments.

Men in search of more reassurance of this kind might care to visit the website 'Bravehearts Against Trouser Tyranny', where they will encounter the following argument for the maleness of the kilt: 'In the United States, for example, a guy wearing blue jeans will find himself dressed the same as perhaps 90% of the girls. If a man wants to distinguish his masculinity through clothing, he would do much better by strapping on a real Scottish kilt.'<sup>2</sup> One might very well suspect that the appearance of men in skirts has much more to do with the acquiescence of men and women alike in what might be called the contemporary norm of 'male androgyny' than with any possibility of interchange, disruptive or not, between male and female costume, or the even more remote possibility of what might be called 'female androgyny', whatever that could possibly be..

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<sup>1</sup> Farid Choune, *A History of Men's Fashion*, trans. Deke Dusinberre (Paris Flammarion, 1993), p. 282.

<sup>2</sup> <[hometown.aol.com/brvhearts](http://hometown.aol.com/brvhearts)> Accessed June 13 2002.

### *Forking Paths*

The systematic differentiation of men's and women's clothing which reached its highly unstable, yet still defining climax in the 1850s had begun only in the late medieval period, when so-called 'bifurcated' clothes for men began to make their appearance. The bifurcation within male dress seemed to condition the increasing bifurcation between men's and women's costume. With them, came a new cultural phenomenology of dress, or way of living the body in terms of its clothing. Bodily identity became more and more a matter of 'habit' – and it is indeed in this period, from the sixteenth century onwards that the word 'habit' underwent its decisive shift from the domain of clothing to that of manners and lifestyle, as costume became more than merely customary. The meaning of this bifurcation of costume is itself interestingly bifid. It means both clothes that divide into two at the crotch, and clothes which divide the body between top and bottom, at the waist. With the development of hose and then of breeches, men were marked off from women by the fact that they sprouted division below the waist, like mandrakes or radishes. Could the mad King Lear's momentous apprehension of unaccommodated man as a 'poor, bare, forked animal' (*King Lear* III.iv 113) have been articulated in this way other than at this unsteady dawn of the modern trouser?

The first principle established in the bifurcation of male dress was the acknowledgement and, in suitable cases, the glorification of the male leg. In periods when fashions were for tight breeches and hose, such as the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the effects of this exposure could be uncomfortable for men, especially the spindleshanked or mutton-legged. Recourse was naturally had to prostheses, intensifying the possibilities of ridicule. The *Journal des dames et des modes* reported in 1819 that 'a young man could hardly enter a drawing room without everyone looking at their legs to see if they were natural or false' (naughty little boys were said to undertake bold probations with needles under the dining table). Once looser, more forgiving trousers started to replace tight breeches from the 1820s onwards, Farid Choune writes, 'aristocratic ladies longed for the good old days when tight breeches immediately let everyone know just what a man was thinking'.<sup>3</sup>

An important consequence of the bifurcation of male dress was that it made it appear that only the male half of the population were possessed of the means of locomotion, rendering the sight of female legs in motion, whether pirouetting or pedalling, seem indelicate or even indecent. (Australian slang retains the name 'strides' for trousers.) For at least the next five centuries, women continued to scoot silently and mysteriously about like Daleks beneath their farthingales (sixteenth century), hoop skirts (eighteenth century) and crinolines (nineteenth century). It is hard to imagine the skirt or dress wholly athleticised, for they are designed to dissimulate or translate movement rather than to assist it. Are we now to look forward to André Agassi's hemline lifting to mid-thigh as he reaches for an overhead smash, or David Beckham (why does he keep coming to mind?) flinging his skirts over his head to celebrate a goal? Well, yes, I suppose, to say it is to see it.

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<sup>3</sup> Choune, *History of Men's Costume*, pp. 24, 30.

## Edgeways

For some centuries the competition between man and women seemed to be carried out in terms of the ownership of lateral or horizontal space. As women's gowns and dresses became wider in sixteenth-century Europe, for example, so 'trunk hose' appeared for men, allowing them to strut around in what the traveller Fynes Moryson in 1617 described as 'breeches puffed as big as a tunne'.<sup>4</sup> Of course, dutumescence threatened at every turn; a hanging thumbnail could be enough to cause the opulent wadding of straw, cotton wool or 'bombast' (for which the folk-etymology 'bum-bast' quickly arose), to spew out embarrassingly at court. In the mad mid-seventeenth century, men continued to swell out sideways to an alarming degree, causing this complaint from John Bulwer:

[T]o what end are our Breeches as wide at the Knee, as the whole circumference of the Waste? Or, why so long, do they make men Duck-leg'd? Or, why so strained out with an intolerable weight and waste of Points and Phantsies? To what end doe Boot and Boot-hose Tops appear in that circumference between our Legs, that we are faine to use a wheeling stride, and to go as it were in orbe, to the no little hindrance of progressive motion?<sup>5</sup>

Men seemed to be engaged in a war for lateral *Lebensraum* with women. Bulwer refers to their principal weapons, 'Rhinegraves' or 'petticoat breeches' (the petticoat had originally been a male garment, approximating to the waistcoat). The phrase 'petticoat breeches' could actually be used of two slightly different things: either long underdrawers with deep flounces of lace which fell out over the knee from underneath breeches; or a skirt or petticoat, worn short enough to show the fringes of the bloomer-type breeches worn underneath. Petticoat breeches were cut amazingly wide, anticipating later hysterical convulsions in sartorial space like the Oxford bags of the mid 1920s. Indeed, the high point of the male petticoat, if that is the expression I want, in the 1660s allows us to date the accidental revival of the skirt for men very precisely: it was on April 6, 1661 that Pepys recorded meeting a certain Mr Townsend 'who told of his mistake the other day, to put both his legs through one of the knees of his breeches, and went so all day'.<sup>6</sup>

The extravagance of men's fashion during the Restoration, of which petticoat breeches were the apotheosis, caused concern to other commentators apart from Bulwer. Among these was the diarist John Evelyn, who, in a short, pungent pamphlet entitled *Tyrannus*,

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<sup>4</sup> Fynes Moryson, *An Itinerary, Containing His Ten Yeeres Travell Through the Twelve Dominions of Germany, Bohmerland, Sweitzerland, Netherland, Denmarke, Poland, Italy, Turkey, France, England, Scotland and Ireland...* (London: John Beale, 1617; repr. in facsimile Amsterdam and New York: Da Capo Press, Theatrum Orbis Terrarum Ltd, 1971), Pt. III, p. 176.

<sup>5</sup> John Bulwer, John Bulwer, *Anthropometamorphosis; Man Transform'd; or, The Artificial Changeling. Historically Presented in the mad and cruel Gallantry, Foolish Bravery, ridiculous Beauty, Filthy Fineness, and loathsome Loveliness of most NATIONS, Fashioning & altering their Bodies from the Mould intended by NATURE...* (London: for J. Hardesty, 1650), p. 263.

<sup>6</sup> *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*, ed. Robert Latham and William Matthews, 10 Vols (London: Bell and Hyman, 1983), Vol. 2, p. 66.

*Or The Mode* (1661), called for more restraint and 'mediocrity' (moderation) in clothing, especially men's clothing, reinforced, if necessary by legislation. Evelyn thought there was little in contemporary men's fashion as egregious as petticoat-breeches (or 'pantaloons', as he called them, rather confusingly, given that this expression came to be applied to the tear-jerkingly tight trousers worn at the beginning of the nineteenth century), which he thought 'a kind of Hermaphrodite and of neither Sex'.<sup>7</sup>

It is widely acknowledged that trousers emphasise containment and content: why else would they be known as 'bags'? In their ideal form, trousers do not so much cover as seal or caulk (the maritime associations of trousers for a sea-going nation like Britain may be important). It is for this reason that a certain frisson has always attached, not just to the fly (until the late eighteenth century its office was performed by a fold-down front flap) but also to the edge or boundary-line of the trouser. During the first three decades of the nineteenth century, when the coming of trousers was prepared for by tighter and tighter versions of the pantaloons, much ingenuity was expended on means to prevent the garment, which was usually made of elasticated material, from riding up, with particular attention being paid to the various designs of foot-strap developed at this period. A Yorkshire proverb has it that one can never wholly trust a man who does not tuck his shirt into his underpants. How amazingly and chillingly comprehensible it was for those of us brought up on stories of how careful astronauts had to be about smoothing out their underclothes before committing themselves to their space-suits, to read the diary of one of the September 11<sup>th</sup> hijackers, which urged that he and his comrades go to meet their martyrdom with socks pulled up, laces firmly tied, and shirts tightly tucked in.

I fret a little about the trouser turn-up, which appeared first in the 1880s. In one sense, this might be thought of as a redoubling or gratuitous hemming in of the edge. In another sense, it seems, like the incontinent bird's-nest beard, to open up the male trouser to the kind of accident and contingency that belongs more appropriately to the skirt. English rural folklore has it that the rucked or turned up hem of a skirt foretells good luck for girls and women; somehow being a stray receptacle doesn't seem so fortunate an omen for a man.

### *Fringe Benefits*

What does the metonymy of the petticoat, which is only ever meant to be seen in part, rather than as a whole, tell us? It tells us that skirts are not only thought of as perturbingly open - Sir Horace Mann complained to Hugh Walpole in 1743 of the habit of Italian ladies of wearing breeches, 'such impediments to joy'<sup>8</sup> - but are also *fringed*, in a way that the trouser is not, despite this heightened attention to the point of junction between ankle and leg. Since the seventeenth century, the petticoat has marked, not so much the place where the garment gapes, which was where Roland Barthes famously located *jouissance*, as the place where another, not-quite-hidden garment peeps. The

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<sup>7</sup> John Evelyn, *Tyrannus, Or The Mode: In A Discourse of Sumptuary Lawes* (London: for G. Bedel and T. Collins, 1661), p. 25. References hereafter to this edition in my text.

<sup>8</sup> Horace Mann to Hugh Walpole, 12 November 1743, *The Yale Edition of Hugh Walpole's Correspondence*, ed. W.S. Lewis, 48 Vols (London: Oxford University Press/New Haven: Yale University Press, 1937-83), Vol 18, p. 333.

skirt, as its name suggests, wraps rather than enclosing, touches without grasping, brushes without clasping, caresses, skims, strokes. The lace petticoat, no matter that it is so finely worked, or perhaps even because of this, hints at the torn, the ragged, the frayed, the fractal. The edge of the petticoat reveals that the skirt itself is a kind of depth made up of folds, that is all container and no contained, a foamily laminated volume that is superficial all the delicious way down. Skirts and petticoats are trichaesthetic, evoking the deciduous and diffusive qualities of hair. And, for the true petticoat-fancier, it is the sound of skirts that matters most - the swishing sussuration, the 'frou-frou' of silks in motion, a sound which seems to mark a merger of the friable superficialities of the fabric and the sound into which it melts by abrasion with the air.

The power of the fringe in the history of culture demands a much longer and more pitiless explication than can be afforded here; but we should perhaps at least note that this power of the fringe is often claimed, or its surrender refused, in religious vestments. Christ, whose status as feminised victim-God would be fatally compromised were he ever to have been depicted in trousers or breeches, gave out his power of healing from the hem, or border of his robe, when touched by the hemorrhissa, the 'woman with an issue' (Matthew 9.20-22; Luke 8.43-8). The robes of priests, monks, nuns, judges, monarchs and dons preserve this fetishism of selvedge, of power concentrated at the edge. In late medieval and pre-Enlightenment Europe, the prestige of the fringe is expressed in the heightened attention to marginal ornament. Jews, for example, were not permitted, and equally did not permit themselves, to wear extravagant ornament. Jewish sumptuary regulations and the sumptuary regulation of Jews alike focus throughout this period on fringes, flounces, ribbons, trimmings, cuffs, linings, braid, as well as curls, ringlets, false hair, wigs and veils, and the materials of the edge, fur, lace, velvet.<sup>9</sup>

And what else but a skirt could provide what men for centuries have lacked: the ability to furnish a *lap*? The word furnishes exactly the doubleness that skirts do, and indeed one of the words which are tributary to the English *lap* is Old English *lappa*, cognate with Old Norse *lapp-r*, a clout, or rag, which means the hanging portion, the flap, or skirt, of a garment. The lap is at the edge, and thus to lap is to lick, as a cat laps, waves lap at the shore and, when one piece of textile crosses over on to another, an overlap is formed. But this edge or flap can also support, as in the lap of the Madonna, who supports the agony of the world in the Pietà pose, just as it can whelm or enfold or encircle (hence the circular lap of a running track). It looks as though the phrase 'lap of luxury' is currently in the process of changing its defining preposition. We no longer speak so naturally of being 'lapped in luxury', as Hazlitt did early in the nineteenth century,<sup>10</sup> but we still speak of those who are 'in the lap of luxury', the phrase not having quite completed its transition to the idea of being *on* the said lap. The lap is the fringe made into a locale, the outskirt made into an environment.

### *Levity*

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<sup>9</sup> Alfred Rubens, *A History of Jewish Costume*, 2nd edn (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1973).

<sup>10</sup> William Hazlitt, *Table Talk: Essays on Men and Manners*, ed William Carew Hazlitt, 2 Vols (London: 1869), Vol 2, p. 323.

For reasons that are probably far too interesting for me ever to have wanted to go into, I have never been able to hold steadily in my mind what I am assured are the crucial differences between a dress and a skirt. That is, my brain knows that dresses hang from the shoulder and skirts hang from the waist, but my tongue constantly betrays this distinction. However, it was a distinction that seemed to be quite important for the V&A exhibition. Dresses are billowy, flimsy, nebulous, dotty, spotty things, and their wearing by men a conspicuous sign of shame, travesty or provocation, as when grunge musicians of the 1980s like Nirvana's Kurt Cobain borrowed their girlfriends' dresses to perform in. (We should remember, though, that provocation, like shame, protects the provoker from humiliation like a cloak of invisibility). But what were on show at the V&A exhibition were almost exclusively skirts, beautifully tailored garments that could form the bottom half of suits, or be worn with jackets. In this sense, the logic of top-bottom bifurcation was being safely retained. This bifurcation of the top and the bottom is actually one of the areas in which men's and women's fashions have been most decisively converging since the late nineteenth century, suggesting that the skirt has participated for some time in the masculinisation of female dress. There was but one exception to this in the exhibition. Jean-Paul Gautier's statement that 'Putting a skirt on a man is not a travesty. Putting a bra on him is' was blazoned at the entrance of the V&A display; but it was next to one of his own designs, a ball-gown in black duchesse satin, with a sash across its imaginary bosom and dropped Scarlet O'Hara shoulders, that seemed to cross the very line his statement established.

The fact that a skirt goes round the body, covering or doubling it without necessarily supporting it or holding it in, while a dress hangs upon or from the body, is also important. It seems as though, in various cultures and at various times, the idea of female attire has been organised around what I hereby denominate a *pendemics*: a somatics of all that hangs, dangles, drops, swings, sways, tails and trails. The dress has this pensile quality in common with ear-rings, nose-rings, ribbons, tassels, sippets and tippets, and all those other frayings and swayings of the edge. Such frayings are above all light: they not only drop, they can also lift, swing and ripple (unlike trousers). This quality of lightness seems to have disturbed John Evelyn in his denunciation of phantastical French-inspired fashions for men in 1660s London. He wrote of the vast numbers of French tailors in the city, 'such Armies, and Swarmes of them, as this one City alone maintains, who hang in the Ears, embrace the Necks, and elegant Wasts of our fair Ladies in the likeness of *Pendants, Collers, Fans, and Peticoats*, and the rest of those pretty impediments, without which Heaven and Earth could not subsist' (6). It was the variegated lightness of male fashion which called forth Evelyn's most energetic disdain:

It was a fine silken thing which I spied walking th'other day through *Westminster-Hall*, that had as much Ribbon on him as would have plundered six shops, and set up twenty Country Pedlers: All his Body was dres't like a May-Pole, or a *Tom-a Bedlam's* Cap. A Fregat newly rigg'd kept not half such a clatter in a storme, as this Puppets Stremares did when the Wind was in his Shroud's; the Motion was Wonderfull to behold, and the Colours were Red, Orange, and Blew, of well gum'd Satin, which argu'd a happy fancy; but so was our Gallant over charg'd *Indutumne an ornustum hominem, habere vestem, an bajulare*, that whether he were clad with this Garment, or (as a Porter) only carried it, was not to be resolv'd. (11-12)

To be light, with that special kind of levity or light-mindedness that characterises a slave to 'la mode' was to be formless: to be all edges was to have no stable, or continuous outside.

be it thus excusable in the *French* to alter, and impose the *Mode* on others, for the reasons deduc'd; 'tis no less a weakness, and a shame in the rest of the World, who have no Dependency on them, to admit them, at least, to that degree of Levity, as to turn into all their shapes without discrimination. (7)

For a man who believes, as Evelyn does, that '[t]he people of *Rome*, left off the *Toga*, an Antient and Noble Garment with their power (3), is of the opinion 'that the *Swisse* had not been now a Nation, but for keeping to their Prodigious Breeches (5), and quotes with approval Tertullian's maxim *Quomodo praecepta Dei custodietis...lineamenta corporis non custodientes?* 'How can we expect that men should keep the Commandments of God, or of the King, that preserve not the Lineaments of their Bodies?' (16), it is certainly shape rather than size that most matters. It is not a particular kind of fashion, so much as that restless inconstancy of contours that characterises fashion as such, which agitates the lineaments of gender:

Now we are all twist, and the long *Pedo* has been taken at distance for a pair of Tongs; and anon all Buttock: One Gallant go's so pinch'd in the Wast, as if he were prepared for the Question of the Fiery-plate in *Turky*; and another's so loose in the middle, as if he would turn *Insect*, or drop in two: Now the short Wast, and Skirts in Pye-crust is the Mode, then the Wide-hose, or (which is more shamefull) like *Nero's Lacernata Amica*, the Man in Coats again; *Monstrum geminum, de viro foemina, mox de foemina vir*: So as one that should judge by the appearance, would take us all to be of Kin to the fellow that begs without Armes, or some great Mens Fools: Methinks we should make water sitting, and since we deny our Sex, learn to handle the distaffe too. (9-10)

The idea of the light or lifting skirt survives into the image of Marilyn Monroe trying to keep her skirt down over the insufflating hot-air grille. And yet the impulse to masculinise is also in evidence in the history of the skirt, and not just through verticality or the longitudinal emphasis of the pencil-skirt or (odd though it may seem) the mini-skirt. The Elizabethan farthingale had been kept expanded by a solid, toilet-roll arrangement worn underneath the skirt. The hoop skirt, invented in the early 1700s by a Mrs Selby, manifested the desire for aeration without surrendering contour. With a whalebone exoskeleton, and a stabilising hoop worn around the hem, a woman with a hoop petticoat could be hard and empty rather than soft and void, or, as in the farthingale, soft and stuffed. The hoop skirt, which projects stiffly outwards, as well as hanging downwards, marks the migration of the 'erectile edge' from the ruff to the skirt. The hoop petticoat gave rise to considerable resentment and mockery in the mid eighteenth century. In Joseph Gay's poem 'The Hoop Petticoat', first published in 1719 and reprinted at intervals thereafter, the invention of the garment is credited to the intervention of nymphs anxious to help to disguise the burgeoning condition of Cloe, after she has surrendered to the embraces of Thyrsis. The poem ends with a concord of the nymphs to celebrate the new invention. The defensive powers of the skirt are proclaimed by the nymph Cloris:

"This *New Machine* a sure Defence shall prove,  
"And guard the Sex against the Harms of Love

“As the fierce *Porcupine*, whom Nature arms,  
“Abroad securely preys, nor dreads Alarms.<sup>11</sup>

But it is the spaciousness rather than the hardness of the garment which is finally emphasised. The poem concludes with an evocation of the stately maritime triumph of this artefact of reticulated air, which provides a stiff retort to the ribboned frigate mocked by John Evelyn in the previous century:

The Senate now adjourn’d, the Dames Decree  
The matchless CLOE shall their Leader be;  
The matchless CLOE now accepts the Place,  
And moves the foremost, with Majestic Grace:  
The spacious PETTICOAT, in bright Array,  
Like a tall Ship, does all its Pride display,  
Swells with full Gales, and sweeps along the way.<sup>12</sup>

### *Fortunate Fall*

As men’s clothes, top and bottom, became narrower through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, their costume would come to be associated more and more with longitude and verticality. Women expanded sideways, to occupy space laterally. Influenced by military uniform, men’s clothes became identified more and more as vectors (bearskins, stripes, and so forth), while women’s clothes became identified with space itself. More and more, in moving towards the middle of the nineteenth century, men became pointed, alert and attentive; while women spread, inert but amorphous, their clothes blurring their outlines. What, in the light of this, is anorexia but the envy of this male profile, attenuated to a dimensionless line?

If trousers express a kind of insurgence from the earth, as well as an Antaeus-like contact with it, then they also of course, have their downside. I have referred to the struggle to keep pantaloons from riding up in the early nineteenth century. It was after men became verticalised by breeches and trousers, that keeping up appearances started to be so much and so explicitly, a struggle against gravity. One of the reasons that Samuel Beckett may have viewed all-female productions of *Waiting for Godot* a little quizzically was the farcical trousers play with which the play ends, as Vladimir and Estragon discuss ways of hanging each other from a tree using the rope around Estragon’s waist which, once removed, causes his trousers to slither down to his ankles unobserved. Hearing that, in one production of the play, Estragon’s trousers were being allowed to come to rest at half-mast, Beckett acted decisively to expunge this hideous taint of pathos, writing to the director to insist that the trousers plunge all the way to the ankles. The great age of the aerated woman and the suspended man had arrived; men would live their lives for some centuries in fear of all the different forms that could be taken by ‘the drop’. We are still governed by this regime of reach and uprightness. Women have not had too much

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<sup>11</sup> Joseph Gay, *The Hoop-Petticoat: An Heroi-Comical Poem in Two Books*, 4th edn, in *The School of Venus: Or, The Lady’s Miscellany. Being a Collection of Original Poems and Novels Relating to Love and Gallantry*, 2nd edn (London: for E. Curl, 1739), p. 62.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, p. 66.



difficulty in borrowing the dignity that comes from wearing breeches or trousers: but think of how much that would still have to change, and how decisively, for women to be able to aspire to the disgrace to which men are heir as a result of debagging or dropped trousers.

One of the most important ways of arresting fall in modern men's clothing, is the pocket. Indeed, the concern with pockets in male dress has been one of the most striking differences which have arisen between male and female clothing since the end of the eighteenth century. Trousers have pockets, while women's clothes continued to be conspicuously and systematically unprovided with them. Initially, this seems puzzling, for the spaciousness of female dress would seem to allow much more opportunity for the insertion of pockets than male dress. It also seems at odds with what we might naturally assume about conceptions of the male body, as full and self-sufficient, and the invaginated, mutable and expectant spaces of the female body. One wonders if this is not the precise point, that men have pockets, because women *are* pockets.

This strange bifurcation must surely also have to do with the passage to an age of acquisition and portable property. To wear the trousers is to have need of somewhere to put your money. The beginnings of the modern trouser may have been in the 'sans-culottes' of the French Revolution, who spurned aristocratic breeches in favour of the trousers worn by the labouring classes. Trousers have never lost their fanciful associations with utility and practicality; they are the signs of occupation, of being taken up in what you do, rather than consumed in what you are. Boys' pockets are filled with magical objects whose purpose is to confirm their subjecthood. Phrases like 'jingling your change' and 'playing at pocket-billiards', meaning using the pocket for semi-public self-pleasuring, gives acknowledgement of the secret, and not-so-secret access to the reassuring rites of autotactation granted to males. The traditional absence of pockets in women's dress is part of the lack of self-access that is also confirmed in back-fastenings in women's corsets, dresses ('just zip me up would you?') or underwear. Again, the skirt is closer to the trouser in this respect than the dress, for skirts are much more likely to be furnished with pockets than dresses. Of course, both skirts and dresses have been made with pockets at various times, but the norm is for them to be disguised, as a slit or longitudinal parting, so as not to break the line of the garment. However frilled and flounced and looped and slit and slashed their attire may be, women are still expected to instance a sleek entirety and intactness when it comes to pockets. Even today, men's tennis shorts are conspicuously provided with these powerful articles, while designers of women's tennis skirts are violently allergic to allowing women anywhere to put their second service ball, requiring them to rely instead on bizarre holsters worn at the wrist, stuffing the ball in their knickers, or just repeated petitioning of the ball-boy. Men's pockets, by contrast, bulge. When male trade unionists and university lecturers take to wearing skirts, we can be sure that they will in no time acquire the lumpy, potato-filled contours of their suits.

Women have to learn amazing skills of improvising pockets about their persons. I can remember the time when all women, especially doting aunts, could be relied upon to have a damp screw of tissue stuffed into the wrists of their cardigans, and all true men knew that they should be able to conjure from their pockets a parachute-like expanse of cotton handkerchief to staunch female tears. To this system of things belongs the image of the Mata-hari with a derringer in her stocking-top, or, most revealingly of all, the stripper who has nowhere to tuck her tips but into her cleavage. The lap is another of these improvised pockets.

Perhaps the refusal of pockets to women is also intended to ensure that women must carry things, to confirm the logic of the pendant: beads, bags, purses, children. The literal in-dependence of men is signified by the pocket. At times when men have been in competition with women to occupy space, such as the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in Europe, they have tended to furnish themselves with appurtenances: purses, handkerchiefs, fans, gloves. Men even carried muffs in the 1660s, for which the well-known sharpness of the winters is not enough to account; Pepys records borrowing his wife's muff from the previous year to go out with in November 1662.<sup>13</sup> All of this seems magnificently clinched by the appearance on the scene of the ultimately masculinised skirt, in the form of the 'utilikilt', an example of which was on display in the 'Men In Skirts' exhibition at the V&A. The utilikilt is a kilt that is a magnificent expansion of the male belt, and is nothing but slots, sockets and sheaths, from which the busy workman can hang his wrenches, pliers and hammers, always in obedience to the male sumptuary rule that things that hang must not swing (all gunslingers know you need a string to tie your holster to your leg). The classic original product produced by the Seattle-based Utilikilts company is described irresistibly on their website as being furnished with 'multiple pockets, key ring, tape measure loop, and a collapsible hammer loop of rigid leather which snaps flush with the body when not in use'.<sup>14</sup>

#### *Petticoat Government*

It has sometimes been said that the direction of appropriation in clothing since the late eighteenth century has been uniformly from male to female; as more and more, women have borrowed male styles of dress, while men have hardly been drawn at all to female styles. If this is true, it has been so only since about the mid-nineteenth century, the period in which male and female fashions seemed to have become most conspicuously polarised. In fact, it is only at this period that skirts and trousers first became fixed as the guarantee of the difference between women and men. Women's crinolines ballooned them out into vast inverted champagne glasses, while men's trousers became straighter and darker than ever.

It was at this high meridian of Empire that James Robinson Planché began his *Cyclopaedia of Costume* with a kind of ethnohistorical bifurcation based upon the trouser: 'The nations of the ancient world might be fairly divided into two great groups, or classes, the trowsered and the untrowsered.'<sup>15</sup> The gloomy, chilly, hydrophobic Celts and Cimmerians of the North not only clung to their *bracae* but also persuaded some of their ventilated and irrigated Mediterranean invaders to adopt the style. Eventually, the trouser would come to signify the triumph of Northern Protestantism over the Southern. But the ancient adherence of the Celt to his characteristic legwear had been a concern for a long time. Fynes Moryson described the breeches of the Irish with unconcealed disgust:

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<sup>13</sup> *Diary of Samuel Pepys*, 30 November 1662.

<sup>14</sup> <[www.utilikilts.com/catalog-x.htm#original](http://www.utilikilts.com/catalog-x.htm#original)> Accessed 13 June 2002.

<sup>15</sup> James Robinson Planché, *A Cyclopaedia of Costume: Or Dictionary of Dress*, 2 Vols (London: Chatto and Windus, 1879), Vol 2, pp. 4-5.

Touching the meere or wild Irish, it may truly be said of them, which of old was spoken of the Germans, namely that they wander slovenly and naked, and lodge in the same house (if it may be called a house) with their beasts. Among them the Gentlemen or Lords of Countries, weare close breeches and stockings of the same peece of cloth...Their said breeches are so close, as they expose to full view, not onely the noble, but also the shamefull parts, yea they stuff their shirts about their privy parts, to expose them more to the view.<sup>16</sup>

By the middle of the eighteenth century, it was the looseness, rather than the fetid closeness of Hibernian costume below the waist that aroused contempt in the English, and accelerated the adoption of the trouser. After the defeated uprisings of 1715 and 1745, the wearing of the kilt was suppressed, along with the rest of Scottish national costume, even though the kilt itself was a much more recent development than the indigenous Celtic trews.<sup>17</sup> The idea that the Scots needed to be educated into the wearing of trousers seems to have a lot to do with the widespread prejudice in England that Scotland ('Itchland', as it was sometimes derisively known) was a country of rampant lousiness and scabies, where the national partiality for open dress was brought about by the need for constant access to pruritic private parts.

The victory of the fantasy of the closed and utilitarian trouser over the insubstantial and showy skirt seemed secured when women begin to clamour for access to this 'rational' form of dress. At the launch of the National Dress Society, shortly to change its name to the Rational Dress Society, in 1887, Lady Hambleton declared, cracking a riding whip to emphasise her points, that '[p]etticoats are exhausting, unhealthy, dirty and dangerous. The trouser is not only more comfortable, healthy and clean, but also more decent, as less liable to derangement.'<sup>18</sup> Meanwhile, Oscar Wilde, whose wife was a supporter of the rational dress movement, was calling for 'notable and joyous dress' for men, which would 'use drapery to a great extent and will abound with joyous colour'.<sup>19</sup>

As is often the case, pornography is a useful indication of the way in which the politics of these interchanges were lived out, for it was during the nineteenth century that clothes started to be important operators in sadomasochistic fantasy. The phrase 'petticoat government' was popular for titles of plays and novels dealing with the power of women. The phrase denoted the dubious entry of women into political or public life, often with the implication that they use sneakily indirect means to gain their ends. Francis Trollope used the phrase as the title of a novel in 1850, as did Baroness Emmuska Orczy, the author of the 'Scarlet Pimpernel' stories.<sup>20</sup> By the 1880s, the phrase had already been

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<sup>16</sup> Moryson, *Itinerary*, Pt. III, p. 180

<sup>17</sup> Loudon Macqueen Douglas, *The Kilt: A Manual of Scottish National Dress* (Edinburgh: Andrew Elliott, 1914).

<sup>18</sup> Quoted in James Laver, *Modesty in Dress: An Inquiry Into the Fundamentals of Fashion* (London: Heinemann, 1969), p. 153.

<sup>19</sup> Quoted, *ibid*, p. 156.

<sup>20</sup> Francis Trollope, *Petticoat Government: A Novel* (London, 1850); Baroness Emmuska Orczy, *Petticoat Government* (London: Hutchinson and Co, 1910). See too George Dance's play *Petticoat Government: An Interlude* (London: Thomas Hailes Lacey, 1855) and George R. Smiley's *Petticoat-Utopia: Or When the Women Rule* (London: H.E. Morgan, 1910).

commandeered by male masochists and their suppliers to describe the voluptuous process of being mastered by powerful women. Leopold Bloom in *Ulysses*, that *homme moyen masochist* whose mainstream petit-bourgeois perversity seems to have taken shape largely through fin-de-siècle pornography, provides commentary on the shift (dear me) which the phrase had undergone by 1900. 'Petticoat government' now denoted not only government by the petticoat, but also government *through* the petticoat. At the same time, the 'government' in question had much more to do with the nursery and the stable than with Whitehall. One might sneer that sexual fantasy is here doing its usual work of making politics safe, except that, of course, in the late Victorian and Edwardian periods, it was failing miserably to do even that. By around the turn of the century, men of my stripe could imagine no more delicious degradation than to be forced to wear petticoats. The sense that to be forced to wear female clothing was a humiliation devoutly to be wished by any red-blooded, yellow-bellied man was actually secured by the drift away from obviously female to male styles in women's clothing in the last two decades of the century. The *domme* was occasionally furred and perfumed like Wanda in Sacher-Masoch's tedious *Venus in Furs*, but, for the most part, her iconography became increasingly brawny, as she became variously bloomed, knickerbockered, jodhpured, spurred, booted and suited. (Steady, boy.) The genre seems to be going strong. The British Library catalogue dates its copy of *Dominated Into Skirts* as 1988 (though our College library has yet to secure its copy), and the websites devoted to the topic seem to be legion.<sup>21</sup> I am interested by the preposition in the title *Dominated Into Skirts*, which, in the unlikely event of this tale of one man's initiation into the delights of tulle and lipstick being translated into Latin, would no doubt provide a fine opportunity to demonstrate the use of *in* or *ad* + accusative to denote 'motion towards'. It seems to imply that the domination comes first, then the recourse to skirts, as though skirts provided some sort of natural sequel or even relief from the domination, opening up the possibility that one might be 'dominated into skirts' in the same way as one might be 'bored to tears'.

I see now how lamentably little experience I have had of wearing skirts and dresses, and would, I am sure, welcome the chance to do so without gaping zips and pinging buttons. But the V&A exhibition seemed uncertain about what it was portending or recommending. Were we supposed to slip into frocks because there should now be no inhibitions, or hang-ups? (I leave that metaphor unannotated.) Or were we being tempted to indulge in sly semioclasm? Spontaneous self-expression, in other words, or staged transgression? Rational, reforming expansion of the limits of the plausible, or guerrilla action against the sartorial symbolic order? Either case might be liable to reveal the opposite as its inner lining. How can one naturally adopt a style that is shot through with such irony and challenge? Alternatively, why sport so daring a style if nobody at all were put out by it? So how can I show up to an Academic Board meeting in a skirt? But, then, what would be the point if I could?

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<sup>21</sup> *Dominated Into Skirts* (London: Swish Publications, 1988).