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Is Drag Morally Objectionable?

ABSTRACT

We are arguably living through a golden age of drag, with drag kings and queens prominent in our society and media. Drag seems like fun. However, it has a serious side. Some critics think drag is morally objectionable because of its supposed (inherent) misogyny and have compared it to black and white minstrelsy 'blackface'. I detail the challenge and show that whilst there is some motivation for it, it can be countered. In particular I respond to the challenge in two ways. First I follow the critics by focusing on male drag queens and consider the supposed harms and benefits of the practice of men dressing up and performing as women. Second, I explore the various forms that drag currently takes. I argue that the variety of types of drag and the possibilities of the artform show that the critics' objection to the general artform may well not go through because it is based on a questionable understanding of the artform.

1. Introduction

Drag performance has been with us for centuries and occurs in many cultures.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 performances at local community events. But drag raises a difficult issue, heightened by its current popularity. Some commentators think that drag belittles women in

¹ Critics routinely criticize any male-to-female cross-dressing performance, not just modern drag. My discussion goes through even if one narrows one's focus. For comprehensive discussions of contemporary drag and its history, which act as touchstones for many of the points I make, see Doonan (2019); Edward and Farrier eds. (2020) and (2022); and Senelick (2000).

some fundamental way. It is inherently misogynistic and is morally objectionable for this reason.²

My aims are to articulate and understand this challenge, and then weigh the relevant considerations. I argue that, on balance, drag *as a general category* is not morally objectionable, or at least critics need to do more to convince us since there are positive comments to make about it. Indeed, the challenge to drag looks less convincing the more one asks what drag itself is. However, whilst presenting the positive case for drag I make concessions since the matter is complex. Even if one defends drag as a general art type, one should acknowledge that some individual performances, performers, fashions within the artform, and artistic personae are objectionable because they belittle women in some way.³

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

Drag is an artistic performance, of either 'high' or 'low' art, in which gender roles are questioned, emphasized and/or celebrated, either as a 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 start things, but it is (deliberately) deficient in at least one regard, which I raise in §4.2. Some drag performances focus solely on artistic creation and arguably the focus is not on gender roles even as a secondary feature.

There is a wider context to my discussion, which I call 'the ethics of imitation'. In brief, imitation, which I employ as a general term for a range of actions (such as homage, copying,

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 do not employ any separate category of transwomen.

³ I use 'artform' throughout as a general, neutral term covering artistic performance as well as entertainment.

impersonation), is a deep-seated, everyday fact about humans in many settings. Imitation undoubtedly has positive effects; because of it art and science progress, businesses are efficient producers, and so on. But there is a darker side. Impersonations can upset people. People thief through infringements of copyright or through plagiarism. Some people pretend to be from other groups in society, often innocently and sometimes involving self-deception, but often with unwanted and devastating consequences. Many people are currently concerned about acts of cultural appropriation where people from one group ape or take aspects of another group's culture, where this act may silence those in the group suffering the appropriation or alter in damaging ways people's views of the group.⁴ There is more to say about each example (and others); some impersonations are legitimate even if they upset their target, for example. There is a need for philosophers to understand the normative contours of different forms of imitation: what these forms are, whether and how they connect to each other, and which forms of imitation are permissible, impermissible and desirable.

Drag performance is a form of imitation, and it sometimes involves direct impersonation of individuals. As we will see, it is controversial because some people think it harms women. It therefore acts as an interesting case for the wider ethics of imitation.

I proceed as follows. In §2 I detail the challenge. I then respond in two broad ways. In §3 I work within critics' focus on male drag queens and discuss whether this type of performance is morally acceptable. These responses are important in and of themselves, but they also introduce my next discussion. In §4 I explore the variety of drag types and the explosion of the artform as it is currently practiced. This indicates that critics may not understand the general artform and so, whilst some individual performances may be morally objectionable, the artform itself is not. In §5 I address the charge that drag is objectionable because it is akin to racial impersonation, as shown by black and white minstrelsy. I briefly suggest the artforms might be judged differently because any comparison needs to draw on the social and political history of each. This will then affect what we say about any individual performance.

⁴ See, for example, Young and Brunk eds. (2009).

2. The Challenge

2.1. The Main Challenge

Some people, such as some religious fundamentalists, think there is something inherently morally objectionable about men dressing up as women full stop. This type of criticism is not my topic here. Instead, the main challenge is that there is something objectionable about men dressing up and then performing as women because of the effects it has on the latter. Furthermore, from what I can discern, the criticism is that there is something generally structural about drag such that it enables and encourages certain significant harms. Inevitably our attention will be drawn to particular types of effect and particular types of performance or individual performances which indicate what is objectionable about the general artform itself. Of course, the more benefits we find, the more we may be sceptical of the challenge, as we will see.

The following from Kelly Kleiman is typical of the challenge that interests me.⁵

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)

⁵ There are no philosophy journal articles about drag as far as I know. I use sources from other subject areas, popular cultural books, and op-ed columns in newspapers and magazines. I collect ideas in order to understand the challenge and, perhaps, inspire others to write on the topic.

As Kleiman does here, and as others do, at present I assume that 'drag' refers only to men dressing up and performing as women. Indeed, that is the structural feature that is morally objectionable: men performing as women. Kleiman also highlights types of harm and blackface minstrelsy. She does not discuss offence that an audience may feel, in keeping with other critics. Of course, some performances may be offensive because they insult and ridicule, whether or not intentional. But then insult and ridicule can be forms of bullying and we are then into cases of harm. For these reasons and reasons of brevity, I focus on the issues of harm Kleiman and others raise, not offence.

Kleiman mentions two main types of harm. First, performers might *insult and ridicule* women, be it individual women, types of women or women in general. The act of insulting or 'making fun of' may be intended to cause harm, but it may be unintended and may even be intended as playful. Even so, the effect could be the same. The women may be ridiculed in their eyes and/or the eyes of other parties. Second, through drag performances, either individual ones or, more likely, through general drag culture and routine depictions, women are *denied full agency*. 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. There may be performances that exhibit both types of harm and cases that call into question whether we have a sharp binary amongst the harms. This is all to the good if one is criticising drag. I use these two ideas simply to frame the challenge; I do not discuss how sharply distinct they are.

These harms are given extra force by another factor. Men are already in control. Despite some honourable societal exceptions, men have been in power in most societies in history. Drag helps to cement this power imbalance. Indeed, given this is the societal background against which drag develops, then drag can be seen as a type of 'punching down': a way in which powerful people can ridicule or control (or be seen to ridicule and control) those with less power. Even if drag performers do not intend this, drag can be seen as part of the problem, not the solution.

The foregoing may be a little abstract. What sorts of depiction might harm and what consequences might ensue? First, consider various stereotypical drag depictions: the nag, the dumb blonde, the power-crazed Amazon, the battle-axe mother-in-law. These ridicule women, most or all of whom are not as depicted. We have parodies that can tip into bullying.

Second, here are two indicative examples of harmful consequences that may come from a denial of women's agency. First, consider again many societies across history where women have been denied positions of power. Those societies 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. Second and more specifically, think about recent trends in female clothing and cosmetics. Arguably these have been influenced by drag culture. Certain make-up routines, particularly those involving contouring, require much time, energy and money. Some routines last an hour or more, 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 their other activities. In contrast, women that shun such fashions may feel under pressure to conform or face certain discrimination in some circles. Again, drag may not be the main evil here, perhaps worse are the fashion and cosmetics industries, but, so the criticism goes, drag is not helping.⁶

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

2.2 Blackface and Womanface

The challenge just articulated is troubling enough. However, it is often made vivid as follows. Critics frequently draw attention to racial impersonation, often focusing on 'blackface' as employed in black and white minstrelsy. Such racial impersonation is more than just dressing up as someone from another race or ethnicity. We often see the insults, the denial of agency, the degrading stereotypes, and the power relations mentioned earlier. At the very least, even if done with the best of intentions, we feel highly morally disquieted by blackface, but at its

⁶ For more on beauty in general, see Widdows (2020).

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. The term 'womanface' is often used in commentary pieces to describe drag. Blackface is racist. Drag is misogynistic. The former is now, rightly, a cultural and performance 'no-go' area. Why not the latter?

I focus on the main challenge. Responding to this will enable a more considered response to the comparison of racial and gender impersonation towards the end.

3. A First Set of Responses

We should accept the following:

(i) Some people, such as religious believers, find the practice of cross-dressing inherently offensive, but that is not our discussion.

(ii) Women in general and types of women are very often less powerful than men or types of men in society. This has been routine and sustained across generations.

(iii) Some individual drag performances and/or personae are harmful because they illegitimately ridicule women or certain women, whether intentional or otherwise.

(iv) Some individual drag performances and/or personae are harmful because they may help, in general, to cement certain forms of control that women, or types of women, are subject to, again whether intentional or otherwise.

However, accepting these and similar claims does not end the discussion.

First, even if we accept that drag has negative moral value, is that sufficient to outweigh its supposed positive entertainment and artistic value? Second, how influential is it in cementing certain forms of control? Drag might be morally objectionable, but is it *very* significant or is it marginal and secondary?

Third, notice that (iii) and (iv) are worded in terms of individual instances. There is an issue to raise, more general than the case of drag, about types and tokens. The criticism is given (or I have interpreted it as being) a criticism of drag in general: the overall type is wrong because of certain structural features. I have admitted that certain individual performances

may be and are objectionable. Perhaps there are also some trends and typical drag stereotypes that are dubious. Critics will point to such examples as *indicative* examples, indicative of what is wrong with the general type, perhaps because such examples are, or easily lead to, insults, and/or because they lead to a denial of agency. Fine. But what happens if we find examples that can be viewed positively in some way - perhaps they are sensitive portrayals of womanhood - and which, further, also indicate something morally positive about drag in general? In our debate we may then have a simple weighing between morally positive and negative examples and aspects, echoing my point in the previous paragraph about weighing moral and aesthetic aspects. We may take the view, of course, that any type that has some morally objectionable tokens needs to be avoided. That is perfectly credible, of course. But what happens if we have a significant number of examples that exemplify morally positive aspects? As we consider drag and debate it, perhaps we should not focus simply on how certain individual examples show that drag *in general* is wrong and therefore should be avoided and discouraged. At some point perhaps our focus should be only on criticizing certain particular examples and then use this focus to ensure that drag in general evolves more positively, something that other examples show is perfectly possible. In short, how many examples and of what sort are required for us to justify that the general artform is objectionable and irredeemable, rather than justifying drag as being a genre that has both good and bad examples?

We should bear these points in mind throughout.

Of course, my third point is expressed somewhat provocatively. Perhaps with enough examples one can see the general artform as dubious. So we need to show that there *are* some morally positive aspects to drag in general shown by examples. Here is a fourth point. Perhaps through dint of their performance male drag queens are (positively and justifiably) subverting various ideas about gender, gender binaries themselves often being harmful to women. (Should men always dress in a certain way? Can men explore and positively express aspects of femininity? If men can act in this way, what does this show us about how women can and should act? What should we now think about gender itself? Perhaps drag enables female agency through its provocative questioning?) This is not just a hypothetical point about what drag can be, this is what drag often has been and is. There are *plenty* of historic examples, so much so that some argue this is inherent in and intrinsic to the artform of *drag*

as opposed to 'misogynistic impersonation of women'.⁷ Drag should also be viewed positively.

Indeed, fifth, whilst one can focus in general on men impersonating women, one should acknowledge that often the performers have been and are gay, bisexual or non-binary. (Further, just by being drag queens, no matter what their sexual orientation or view of their gender, they may be marginalised if it is known they perform.) They were and are very often not amongst the powerful 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, such as racial and ethnic minorities. Consider the activism of drag queens in 1960s USA and other Western societies. They often found common cause with other communities (although by no means all) during that era's notable civil rights demonstrations.

Although they are different, the fourth and fifth points are often considered together: rigid gender binaries are challenged because it is known that some of the performers challenge certain oppressive assumptions in their everyday lives. This may be achieved through the general artform, but it can also be seen in many individual instances. Whilst some men have ridiculed women in particular performances, they also do the same to men, both in the character of the performances and simply because they are performing drag first of all.

Further to these leading points, other ideas come in their wake. One might well think that femininity, or certain aspects of it, should be celebrated. Why should only women be allowed to do this? Why not men? Indeed, additionally, it is noticeable that some women straightforwardly love drag and its often confident admiration and expression of the feminine. Are they being seduced into oppression by an entertaining artform, or are they level-headed enough to separate the good examples and aspects from the bad?

In summary: drag in general is seen positively by some feminist and queer writers, such as Judith Butler, and drag queens themselves because it calls attention to and questions

⁷ See, for example, Doonan (2019) chs. 5 and 9 for this paragraph and the next, plus much of Senelick (2000).

assumptions about gender.⁸ In doing so drag can be both positive about women and effective in enabling various groups to advance certain causes. Notice that in staking out this position, writers may well not sharply distinguish (narrow) drag performance on traditional stage or screen from (wider) drag culture; they assume a continuation between the two. Queer empowerment has been expressed on stage, and what has been and is the stage for drag queens is fluid (just think of everyday, explicit parading in the streets, or modern social media sites such as TikTok). One simply could not have had drag performance without drag (and gay) culture, and vice versa.

The fourth and fifth points in support of drag have not gone unchallenged. For example, Kathleen Stock has responded to Butler and others in an online piece.

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. (Stock, 2019)

Is this fair? Gender binaries may seem cemented, but Stock’s views can be countered. There are some cultures where binaries have shifted and where various third sex and cross-dressing

⁸ For example, see the statements in Hastings (2016). Judith Butler discusses drag in Butler (1990), ‘Conclusion: from Parody to Politics’, and (2004) pp. 213-219.

cultures and communities are strongly established.⁹ Not all of this is caused by drag alone, but it does help. Anyway, one could ask in response why one would 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 defenders and critics of drag overstate their cases, and I return to my earlier thought about influence and significance. Despite the attention it currently receives, drag may be less powerful than is sometimes thought. Even if one can debate how morally objectionable or liberating drag is, both sides may put more weight on the phenomena than is justified.

In addition, Stock might be right to say that modern male drag queens have helped (possibly unintentionally) to increase young women's and teenage girls' desire to look more like drag queens. However, we can ask how much influence drag has in this regard; again, the cosmetics industry may be a greater cause. Further, some drag queens argue that drag subverts assumptions we make about modern beauty and the attendant industries. Some people in a drag audience realise that no matter how glamorous a drag queen looks, this may be because of (a lot of) cosmetics, and underneath it all the performer is 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 themselves and others, whilst going beyond such fun dressing-up to find a form of real beauty. That thought is subversive.¹⁰

Lastly, Stock is simply wrong to imply that the only or main effect that drag's fashions have had is to oppress girls and young women. A highly prominent effect seen across social media is a genuine increase in people's confidence as they experiment within drag. Here we see young men and teenage boys (and young women and girls) 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. In fact, I think there has been an *explosion* of this activity. How long it lasts and how significant it turns out to be is a matter for the future, of course. This might be

⁹ There are many third or other gender communities in different cultures with a long history. See Herdt ed. (1994) for a primer. Whilst not all such cultures are directly influenced by, or are part of, drag, some are such as the Hijras (or Kinnar) of India. See also Senelick (2000), pp. 25-29 especially and the rest of ch. 1.

¹⁰ See Cheddar Gorgeous, from 15min 50sec in *Netflix* (2021).

countered by saying that perhaps all these people, male and female, are being oppressed and revelling in frivolous activities that serve only to take up their time and increase profits for certain companies. Well, perhaps. But perhaps they are also just having fun and perhaps they are fairly clear-sighted about what they wish to do with their time.

No doubt there are some responses available to my counters to Stock, which may echo what she, Kleiman and others say, and there may be further responses to these. In other words, we could continue this back and forth for a while. It is probably worth pausing this illustrative discussion here. I think there is something to the main challenge. Certain drag queens and trends within drag can be seen as insulting to women, and some drag art and culture is misogynistic. There are harms. But how much this should be seen as damning the general artform is questionable, as is the significance of drag in perpetuating these harms. Of course, we may well take the view that harms are still harms and they should be stopped. But there are considerations that show drag can be and is a force for good. As a commentator on this debate I think that, thus far, the discussion at worst is inconclusive, but at best shows that the answer to the question 'Is the general artform of the male drag queen morally objectionable?' is definitely not a straightforward 'yes' and may well be 'no'.

Furthermore, there is more to say than this about drag. We have had a few strong clues already: the subversion of gender assumptions, political activism, expression of oneself, and the artistic celebration of others.

4. A Second Set of Responses

4.1 Types of Drag

Let's take stock. Led by the critics I have focused on male drag queens. It seems right to do so: if any performances are going to harm women, it will be those of male drag queens. However, I have argued that the objection does not go through. But what of other types of drag? These are interesting in themselves but thinking about them will mean we consider drag performance generally and can reconsider male drag queens.

So, consider the following different types of drag:

(i) male drag queens; (ii) female drag kings; (iii) male drag kings; (iv) female drag queens; (v) people who are uncomfortable with gender labels, or at least traditional ones, who perform in 'drag' by adopting the fashion norms (etc.) associated with a particular gender.

If we accept these types, at least as a good start, then we have two questions to raise against the challenge. First, are the other types of drag performance also morally objectionable? Second, how do these different types of drag affect our idea of drag in general and of male drag queens specifically? Discussing the first question (in this sub-section) will lead me to the second (in the next).

I start with female drag kings.¹¹ Are they morally objectionable, or as objectionable, as male drag queens? Is there is such a thing as 'manface'? In response Kleiman says:

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. (Kleiman, 2000, p. 683 quoting Woodhouse, 1989, p. 145)

¹¹ See also Halberstam and Volcano (1999), and Doonan (2019), ch. 3.

So, female drag kings are not doing anything morally objectionable since the power relations are very different. If anything, we should be cheering them on.

I disagree with Kleiman about male drag queens, as above. (Recall that many minorities have been male drag queens, so the power dynamics are more complex anyway.) We can agree, however, that one should give extra encouragement to female drag kings, perhaps because they have had less support and exposure than their drag queen siblings. We can also ask, perhaps in opposition to Kleiman, whether individual female drag kings (and certain performances, personae, etc.) can be criticized for causing not just offence but harm. I think they can. I agree there is a background of power dynamics that might justify female drag kings having more license, but even so some performances may be clear examples of bullying behaviour, for example. Even if some targets are deserving of ridicule (for example, some politicians), such justification will be needed to ward off the criticism that a performance is too insulting. I do not see why female drag kings should get a free pass here.

Stock also comments on female drag kings and makes a different point.

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. (Stock, 2019)

I think Stock is wrong to say that drag kings (that is, female drag kings) are not funny at first sight, made funny only by the material and performance. Plenty of female comics, famous or otherwise, are at first sight as incongruous and as funny (or not as funny) as any equivalents amongst cross-dressing male performers.¹² That is true whatever the persona and stereotype, be it one created as a new character or through a straightforward impersonation, such as Elvis Presley or a politician. This is all as true today as it was in, say, the UK's music halls and American vaudeville. Stock and I may disagree about this, but then we are into the realms of taste, not discussing matters that are morally intrinsic to drag artforms.

Indeed, it leads to a further point. There are plenty of male drag queens who I and others view not as initially funny because they are incongruous. Instead, a reasonable, initial reaction towards some male drag queens is how straightforwardly *glamorous* they are, with little if 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. Further, other initial reactions are available: respect or awe at the artistic presentation for example, or shock at the overt political statement. The sort of response Stock is imagining is to a particular type of male drag queen, which perhaps shows an overly narrow definition and target.

As one might expect, I do not think that female drag kings are morally objectionable in general, even if some individual performances can be. But as we have seen, simply by thinking about a different type of drag and comparing it with male drag queens, we are forming ideas about the nature of drag presentation and performance.

Before I articulate those ideas, what of female drag queens? Kleiman does not say anything about them. I am not surprised since Kleiman published her paper in 2000. Whilst female drag queens existed before, and an argument can be made that some female Hollywood stars (for example, Mae West) were heavily influenced by drag culture, there has

¹² Consider French and Saunders, Kathy Burke, Melissa McCarthy, and many more.

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. In so doing many are pushing artistic boundaries and of what audiences think when they hear '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." (Vikander, 2019)

Are female drag queens morally objectionable in a way similar to male drag queens, or should we be applauding them? 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 ideas of gender norms? This is now getting complicated. It also takes us to a different type of response with our second question above: what is drag?

4.2 Drag Reconsidered¹³

Drag is an evolving and dynamic artform. What is considered by many currently to be 'drag' encompasses a range of forms, continuous with one another: professional male drag queens touring regional gay pubs and bars; avant-garde bearded drag queens influencing the art world; young female and male queens with thousands of TikTok followers; female drag queens and non-binary contestants on *RuPaul's Drag Race*; male and female comics dressing up on a sketch shows; pantomime dames and many other cultural mainstays around the world; plus 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 gender is not the focus, hence my advertised qualifier to my opening definition.¹⁴ Instead the focus is on creativity with fashion and cosmetics, transformation into something other than oneself, on play and fun, sometimes combined with a serious message. We have seen this idea dotted around my commentary thus far. (So our drag types at the start of §4.1 will need addition or alteration, perhaps: (vi) people of any gender, or none, performing within the culture of drag, with a focus on artistic creation and expression, but with little to no focus on gender.)

At this point theorists could discuss whether one should work with a narrower definition of drag (perhaps only male drag queens, or certain sorts of male female illusionists) or a wider definition (something akin to that indicated in the previous paragraph). Certainly the wider definition is seen by many performers and audiences as drag.

¹³ Smith (2019) makes some of the points made in this section. See also Hastings (2016), which includes statements from drag queens about why they do drag. They speak to themes of queer empowerment, artistic experimentation and the celebration of femininity.

¹⁴ Many modern performance artists use make-up and drag-like appearance in their work, but they are not conventional drag queens or kings, and gender is no point of their art even if they identify with drag performance and culture. One forerunner of this is Leigh Bowery, who was part of the 1980s drag scene. Gender was part of his act, but not the main point.

I do not argue here which definition is proper or superior; such discussion will not get us far. Clearly one is more likely to show that 'drag' in general is morally objectionable the narrower one's definition, assuming that it covers examples with obvious moral flaws. And, anyway, we have seen that even with a focus on male drag queens, the challenge is questionable. I think it will be more profitable if we explore what this wider definition is and how it reframes the discussion. It is, after all, a definition or conception of drag that is embraced readily by many current performers and audiences as legitimate. They see the activities that exemplify it as being continuous with core examples of the narrower definition.

Consider something else Stock says:

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?" (Stock, 2019)

As should be obvious by now, I disagree with the claim about reactionary grains. (What grains there are might be positive, anyway.) I agree about the creative potential of drag and that in uncreative hands it can slip into objectionable performances. I change the emphasis, however. I think drag as an artform offers scope for much creativity, and drag culture encourages this. Perhaps it can be argued that in the past fifty years or so drag has been more subversive than other artforms and straightforwardly taps into, and helps in part to motivate, a focus on people's identity. This may well be what gave Butler and others inspiration for their view. Certainly if one views drag as more than just 'a silly man in a dress', and considers other points, such as the above idea 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 easily see the subversion of drag as central to it.

Part of drag culture is not simply to perform on stage or screen as a different gender. Part of it is to identify as a drag queen and in so doing, within some societies, identify as being on the margins, as being misunderstood and, perhaps, as being despised. It should be no surprise that some drag queens at some points in society have protested, often with others, for greater rights for many. None of this seems morally objectionable, unless of course one is against these causes themselves.

This might all be very well, but as well as drag thought of more widely, what of our opening discussion about male drag queens? The quotation from Stock embeds an interesting quotation from RuPaul. Perhaps drag is or has got to the point where we (or some) see it, or many performances, not as men dressing up as women, but as an artform where people (or some) perform *as* a recognisable art-type, the drag queen or king (or 'drag performer' or 'drag act' if one wishes to move away from gender). That is a subtle but hugely important difference. Drag is seen as its *own form of life*, as we philosophers might pompously call it. Looked at through a different lens, some or many drag performers, including male drag queens, are better seen as clowns or artists than as impersonators of women/men. Perhaps they, or at least some of them, are not expressing what they think women are like at all, and try hard not to perpetuate stereotypes. Perhaps, instead, they are performing as an accepted artistic form, with characteristic yet evolving costume, and perhaps in so doing are expressing facets of themselves and being artistically playful. (What, for example, is going on with Hanke above? Is she performing as an extreme version of a woman or as a drag act? Perhaps she is doing both.) In this way, individual performers and performances can be successful or unsuccessful, and morally acceptable or objectionable, as within any artform: a performer may think they are performing as a drag act, as per my thought, but they are in fact simply recycling some tired and morally dubious female stereotype and can be criticized for that reason. Be that as it may, there may be nothing objectionable about the general artform itself here and much to be admired.

This connects with why we have so many different forms that are now considered drag, both forms contemporary with ourselves and historic examples that people now label as 'drag'. Whilst people do and will have been performing as and within recognisable gender stereotypes, some other performers do and were performing simply to express parts of themselves, to experiment within an oppressive society, and to be something different from

the norm. Perhaps it is these positive ideas that express the true idea behind drag, including male drag queens. It is certainly what is going on in our wider definition. And at this stage, again, the general artform is looking far from obviously morally objectionable.

From this point, we can open our frames of reference. Earlier I mentioned male drag kings. Perhaps this type currently has few examples or perhaps very many. Are we looking at male drag queens as performing to impersonate women or viewing them as people who (at least in part) are simply playing around with character? If the former, then professional and amateur male drag kings are currently a vanishingly small group. If the latter, we potentially have *many* examples.¹⁵ We simply have men taking on various male personae and perpetuating stereotypes or whatever else, and doing so in artistically and morally better or worse ways. There are plenty of male performers, both professional and amateur, who have performed comically as religious leaders or as refuse workers, say, for many years in many countries. Any particular performance may be objectionable, but is that something structural based on gender impersonation? The point about power relations may come back but sometimes people are simply having some fun by playing a character, and they may do this more or less well as artists and it may be more or less morally acceptable. (The same is also true of imitation of, say, social class, age and geographical region.) And just as women may feel pressure to conform to certain types, so some men may feel they have to live up to certain stereotypes of being a man, and priests may feel pressured to act in certain ways as priests, and so on. 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. Priests, vicars and the rest get annoyed or even insulted by how some people portray them, I am sure. They are stuck by others in certain pigeonholes and denied ways of being by others that may come quite naturally to them. Should we worry about 'priestface'? The same will be true of some refuse collectors, and of some people from a particular region, and of some from a particular social class or age group. Are we going to rule out as

¹⁵ Professional examples include many performers such as *Beyond the Fringe*, *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, *Kids in the Hall*, *Saturday Night Live*, plus other duos and groups that did much to cement modern ideas of what certain male roles should be assumed to be.

objectionable all forms of imitation, or criticize only individual performances, trends and personae?

This is not an argument to say that our definition of drag should encompass all these professional examples. That will surely stretch the definition to breaking point. Instead my aim is to suggest that a few of these examples might be considered to be part of 'drag' under a broader definition for a variety of reasons and, more importantly, thinking in this way gives us cause to reflect on what is happening in some of the obviously central drag examples.¹⁶

Here I summarize everything so far. The challenge is that drag is morally objectionable. We saw that even with a narrow focus on male drag queens, this challenge may not go through because, arguably, drag in general has positive effects: (i) drag challenges assumptions about gender, (ii) it has been a source of and focal point for queer empowerment, and (iii) it has often found itself at the forefront of political activism. The discussion can continue, with point and counterpoint. We may reach a stage, just within this narrow debate, where we say the problem is with individual examples of performance or personae or trends, not with the general artform. I then moved on to think about different types of drag that in turn helped us to question our starting conception of drag. When we ask if drag is morally objectionable, are we to answer solely by conceiving drag as a form of imitation performance? Or can and should we also view some or many performers performing *as* drag acts, and not only or not even as imitating women? Once we raise and ask this question then (iv) the starting challenge loses some of its power since many performers will not be and should not be taken to be (primarily) impersonating women or indeed (v) be focusing on gender at all, and (vi) drag may be a playful and powerful expression of individuals' own personalities.¹⁷ All six points can be made whilst accepting that some individual performances and trends within drag are morally dubious, whether intentional or

¹⁶ One example I can imagine defending as an example of drag is Barry Humphries' long-lived caricature Sir Les Patterson. But that is for another day.

¹⁷ Regarding (iv), the critics I have read criticize performers. However, perhaps part of the issue should involve how audiences perceive what performers are doing. Do they need to be better educated?

otherwise, in part because they belittle women or, indeed, men if one wishes. But the challenge to the general artform looks questionable.

5. Blackface and Womanface Again

As I said, the challenge of drag being misogynistic is important enough, but connecting it to racial impersonation makes a strong impression.¹⁸ Further, perhaps we can imagine a challenge to me inspired by my preceding thoughts. Surely some racial impersonators, include black and white minstrels, revelled in the fun of the performance and were expressing aspects of themselves. So am I committed to saying that racial impersonation, including blackface, is morally permitted?

To be clear, I do not think I am and I think that black and white minstrelsy, for example, is morally objectionable. (Note: my defence of drag did not simply depend on performers' expressions of themselves. I also considered general motivations for performance and the effects on women and society.) I also believe this is a sensitive area. This section indicates how a defence can be mounted for taking different judgements with respect to drag and black and white minstrelsy, although I think more detailed work is required.

Consider the thoughts of Miz Cracker, a high-profile American drag queen (real name Maxwell Heller) who wrote in 2015 about the issues above and about the charge of 'womanface', stimulated by a post on Twitter by Mary Cheney. Here's an excerpt:

¹⁸ I do not discuss it here, but I think a similar challenge can be raised concerning disability imitation. Similarly, I focus on black and white minstrelsy as others do, but the points I make apply to many racial impersonations, such as 'yellowface' and the histories of Western imitations of people of Asian descent. Note there were drag roles within minstrelsy, see Senelick (2000), pp. 297ff.

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 [and others’] 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)¹⁹

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

¹⁹ See Brundage ed. (2011).

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)

Across the two quotations we have three points. First, the point is made about the differences in historic influence and significance, at least in the USA, between drag culture (it seems narrowly conceived) and black and white minstrelsy. Second, we have reference again to power dynamics in the two types of performance. Third, there is reference to the different motivations of some, many or all performers. I have raised all three points before about drag, in different ways. We now have a picture being built of difference in the histories of the two artforms and the motivations for it.²⁰

Three more, interconnected points can be made. Fourth, there seems nothing wrong with performing with a literal green or blue face. Why should performing with a literal blackened face be any different? Well, if that *were* the only thing being judged, one would be far more relaxed. 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 this, 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 created stereotypes that were used to denigrate and insult and do so systematically and deliberately as part of a social and historic evil, with effects across generations. Further, this happened so often in the history of blackface, in such a routine and high profile way, that any dressing up with black face paint, either at the time or now, *has* to be judged in this way first of all: individual examples, even sensitive ones, are swimming against a large moral tide. In contrast, drag has, or *seems to have*, a different

²⁰ One could try to argue for the difference between drag and minstrelsy by looking only at their modern effects or functions. In the interests of space, I focus mainly on history.

history. I think we can and should acknowledge how drag has been used in misogynistic ways. But it has often come from good motivations and had good effects, and not just isolated good consequences here and there. It has enabled social change, challenged certain oppressive ideas and been a form of empowerment for certain marginalised groups (beyond the performers) in many societies and cultures. That marks it out as different, at least at first and probably second glance.

Fifth, I think Stock and Kleiman (plus Cheney and others on social media) go too quickly from 'here is a morally objectionable imitation' and 'here is a second that is structurally identical' to 'therefore this second imitation is also morally objectionable'. We will end up soon ruling out as morally objectionable many forms of imitation, such as 'classface', 'oldface', 'youngface' and 'priestface', and do so on the basis of their basic structure seemingly causing bad outcomes, not what is objectionable about any particular performance. Racism and misogyny are wrong. But to make the charge of womanface stick to drag in general, one has to do more than say that it is at some bare level structurally identical to blackface.

The sixth point is that literal appearance is not the only thing that matters. As with many artworks, the history of the form affects, sometimes directly, what the artform itself is, its contours and its possibilities. Drag can be seen as female impersonation, and minstrelsy as racial impersonation, but both are more than that. There is a metaphilosophical question to which I have been building. When asking 'Is drag (generally) morally objectionable?' and 'Is drag (generally) 'womanface'?' should one answer ahistorically and apolitically? Should one only judge the literal garb and appearance? My answer is a clear 'no'. One can raise and answer these questions sensibly only if one understands the artform, and one can do that only if one understands its history, how it arose and has evolved, and what performers did within it.

I have suggested, with a few specific ideas, that the history of drag is different from the history of black and white minstrelsy. However, this is not a paper about the history of these artforms. A lengthier study about the two cases is required for my conclusion to go through. (How, for example, should we understand black performers who performed

minstrelsy and how does this compare with modern female drag queens?²¹) But my hunch is that historical work will bear out there being some difference between the artforms and, further, that this might justify offering a different moral view of them that will then influence (but not determine) how one should view individual examples within each.

6. Concluding Thoughts

Here's Miz Cracker again, writing in 2015 with her own conclusion.

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. (Cracker, 2015)

And she's right. I think the challenge of womanface and the concern about drag is onto something. Despite the positive noises I have made, I have admitted 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,

²¹ See Brundage ed. (2011) pp. 55-61 and pp. 149-153 for some of this minstrelsy history.

thus reinforcing the power of drag. If we think that drag can, at times, not just subvert gender but celebrate it, perhaps it needs to do so in sensitive ways such as the example Miz Cracker gives. Sometimes drag is just a man in a dress. But sometimes it is 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.²²

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