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# Transvestites in the Middle Ages<sup>1</sup>

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Transvestism, which is usually defined in terms of psychopathology, must also be examined in terms of status gain and loss. This appears most obvious in an examination of the lives of the transvestite saints whose legends and myths help set Western attitudes toward transvestism. All of these saints were female, and by implication females could only gain by donning the clothes of the male. Males, on the other hand, lost status if they wore items of female apparel, and the only way society could justify such a loss was through attaching erotic connotations to such conduct which made it both dangerous and sinful.

Transvestism, the desire to dress in the clothes and even assume the role of the opposite sex, has so far been little studied and little understood. The very term was coined only in 1910 (Hirschfeld 1910). Later Havelock Ellis did a series of studies of the phenomenon under the term "Eonism" (1936). Since then there have been several studies (Cauldwell 1956; Savitsch 1958; Stoller 1968), but most explanations have been in terms of psychopathology and have concentrated on male transvestites. Stoller (1968, pp. 183-87) summed up much of the current thinking on the subject. He felt there was as yet no genetic, constitutional, or biochemical evidence to explain the phenomenon. Male transvestites, however, seem to have several etiological factors in common. (1) The mother has an unconscious wish to feminize her little boy, perhaps as an unconscious expression of her own homosexuality. (2) In such cases the father is either a co-conspirator by being silent and passive about the matter or is altogether absent. (3) Transvestites themselves suffer from castration anxiety, for which they compensate by making themselves into phallic women. (4) Transvestism actually is an efficient way of handling very strong feminine identification without having to succumb to the feeling that one's masculinity is being submerged by feminine wishes. In effect it allows a man to channel these feelings through his feminine dress and still be acutely aware of the insignia of his maleness, a penis. Noteworthy of almost all studies of transvestism is the fact that it is defined as psychopathological only in terms of male cross-dressing. There is a curious lack of literature on female cross-dressing, as if to imply either that the phenomenon does not exist or that if it does it is not a problem which can be explained in terms of psychopathology.

<sup>1</sup> Research sponsored by the Erickson Educational Foundation.

Sociologists have more or less adopted this same attitude and when they have looked at the phenomenon have done so in terms of deviant organizations (Sagarin 1969; Buckner 1964). Yet it would seem obvious that most behavior, particularly that defined as deviant, must be influenced by cultural and social structural variables, and the implications of these variables deserve the attention of sociologists. This paper, one of a series examining general attitudes toward sex, under the sponsorship of the Erickson Educational Foundation, argues that Western attitudes toward transvestism (and probably transexualism as well) have been influenced by status concepts about the role of the sexes. The result has been to differentiate between women who dressed as men and men who dressed as women. Female cross-dressers were tolerated and even encouraged, since they were striving to become more malelike and therefore better persons. Male transvestites, on the other hand, were discouraged not only because they lost status but also because during the formation of Western attitudes most writers could find only one possible explanation for a man's adopting woman's guise, namely, a desire to have easier access to women for sexual purposes. It should be added as a corollary that homosexual cross-dressing, the so-called drag queen, probably only became a significant phenomenon when the status-loss concept associated with transvestism was accepted as part of Western culture. If this role and status explanation has any validity, then it is important that researchers in the field take into consideration the sociological as well as psychological variables in their explanation of transvestism.

One of the richest sources for examining Western attitudes and conceptualizing the phenomenon of transvestism is the lives of the transvestic saints. A survey of their lives sheds light on development of Western attitudes, and more than anything else shows the status concepts associated with transvestism inherent in Western attitudes. In theory, Western society has been hostile to transvestism, although it has always tolerated impersonation at certain periods or events such as Halloween, carnival days, and masquerade parties. The source of this hostility has been traced to biblical statements, particularly to a passage in Deuteronomy (22:5): "The women shall not wear that which pertaineth unto a man, neither shall a man put on a woman's garment; for all that do so are an abomination unto the Lord thy God." Quite clearly female cross-dressers are condemned as much as men, yet Christianity has always been more hostile to men wearing women's clothes. This part can be explained by medieval Christian attitudes toward women. In general medieval society adopted the view of the Greek philosophers that women were inferior to men (Bullough 1973*b*), although Christianity insisted that women as much as men were a special creation of God. This view is perhaps best summed up by the 13th-century theologian Saint Thomas Aquinas (1947, sec. 1, pt. 1,

p. 92), who wrote: "Good order would have been wanting in the human family if some were not governed by others wiser than themselves. So by such a kind of subjection woman is naturally subject to man, because in men the discretion of reason predominates."

Tied in with and overlying this view of women as creatures who were subordinate to men was a kind of mystic view of the inferiority of females. This attitude, as it entered into Christianity, was exemplified by the Alexandrian Jewish philosopher Philo, who taught that the reason the male was superior to the female was because he represented the more rational parts of the soul, while the female represented the less rational. For Philo progress meant giving up the female gender, the material, passive, corporeal, and sense-perceptive world, and taking the active rational male world of mind and thought. The easiest way for women to approach the male level of rationality was for them to deny their sexuality, to remain virgins; and the words "virgin," "virginity," "ever virginal" occur continually in Philo's references to the best kind of women (Philo 1961, 1963; Baer 1970).

It would seem logical, then, to argue that the female who wore male clothes and adopted the role of the male would be trying to imitate the superior sex, to become more rational, while the man who wore women's clothes, who tried to take on the gender attributes of the female, would be losing status, becoming less rational. This seems to be implied as early as the 4th century by Saint Jerome (1884, bk. 16, col. 567), who wrote that as "long as woman is for birth and children, she is different from man as body is from soul. But when she wishes to serve Christ more than the world, then she will cease to be a woman and will be called man." A similar concept was pressed by Saint Ambrose, also in the 4th century (1887, bk. 15, col. 1938): "She who does not believe is a woman and should be designated by the name of her sex, whereas she who believes progresses to perfect manhood, to the measure of the adulthood of Christ. She then dispenses with the name of her sex, the seductiveness of youth, the garrulousness of old age." The list of similar statements could be much expanded to indicate that the Christian church to a certain extent encouraged women to adopt the guise of men and live like men in order to attain the higher level of spirituality normally reserved to males. Whether this was the actual, well-thought-out intention of these church fathers is doubtful, but there are numerous stories about saintly women who lived and worked as men. Scholars today may argue that many if not all of these saints were legendary rather than real (Delehaye 1961, p. 189), but folk belief further emphasizes that transvestism among women was usually admired and only rarely punished. There are no male transvestite saints, not only because the male who cross-dressed lost status but because he was also associated with eroticism, or with witchcraft. Two examples

illustrate this. This first is reported in the 6th century by the Frankish writer Gregory of Tours.

Gregory (1927, 2:449) reported that during a revolt of some nuns in the convent of Radegunde the rebellious faction charged the abbess with keeping a man clothed in female garb and pretending that he was a woman in the convent. Everyone knew, they claimed, that he "was most plainly of the male sex; and that this person regularly served the abbess." The charges resulted in an investigation which found that indeed there was a male nun. He had donned female garb because as a little boy, according to the physician Reovalis, he "had a disease of the groin and he was regarded as incurable. His mother went to the holy Radegunde and begged her to have the case examined. The saint summoned me, and bade me give all the help in my power. I then cut out his testicles, an operation which in former days I had seen performed by surgeons at Constantinople, and so restored the boy in good health to his anxious mother. I never heard that the abbess knew aught of the matter." As a result of this testimony the charges against the abbess were finally dropped. The implication remains, however, that the only reason a man might don female garb and live in a convent was to gain sexual satisfaction from the nuns.

Later in the Middle Ages, another incident of male transvestism was reported by an inquisitor in southern France. In this second case, dating from about 1250, a number of men disguised as women entered the house of a rich farmer, dancing and singing: "We take one and give back a hundred." The verse referred to a popular belief in the powers of the good people (in Latin *bonae*) to confer prosperity upon any house in which they had been given presents. The suspicious wife of the farmer did not accept the claim of the female impersonators to be *bonae* and tried to end their revel, but in spite of her protestations they carried out all the goods from her house. Perhaps for this as well as similar reasons bishops were requested to look out for throngs of demons transformed into women (Russell 1972, pp. 157, 292, 315), which seems like a prohibition against male cross-dressing.

No such prohibitions appear against women dressing as men, particularly if they assumed the garb of a monk. Probably the archetype for the female transvestistic saints is Pelagia. Her story is rather confused and contradictory, probably because her life incorporates several conflicting legends. She is known both as Pelagia and as Margarito and is also confused with another saint, Margarita, also known as Pelagius. According to the standard versions of the legend Pelagia was a beautiful dancing girl and prostitute in Antioch who was also called Margarito because of the splendor of her pearls. She became converted to Christianity by the saintly Bishop Nonus, who acted as her patron. Not wishing to be identified with her past, Pelagia left Antioch dressed as a male, and under her outer clothes

she wore, with the permission of Nonus himself, a hair cloth undershirt. After much travel she found refuge on Mount Olivet, where she lived as a man known as Pelagius who was admired throughout the Holy Land for his asceticism and holiness. It was not until after her death that her sex was revealed. When they discovered her to be a woman her mourners are said to have cried out: "Glory be to thee, Lord Jesus, for thou hast many hidden treasures on earth, as well female as male" (Butler 1956, 4:59-61; Waddell 1957, pp. 171-88).

The other Saint Margarita-Pelagius has a slightly different story. In this case Margarita was said to have held marriage in such horror that after her betrothal she fled the nuptial chamber in male dress, cut her hair, and took refuge in a monastery under the name of Pelagius. Such were her qualities of devotion that she was elected prior (a male position) of a convent. She acted the part of a man so well that when the portress of the convent became pregnant and accused Margarita-Pelagius of being the father, the charge was believed. After being expelled from the convent, Margarita-Pelagius found refuge as a hermit in a cave, and it was only at her death, when her true sex was discovered, that she was proclaimed innocent of the crime of which she had been accused (Butler 1956, 4:59-61).

A somewhat similar story is told about Marina, the daughter of a Bithynian called Eugenius, who after being left a widower decided to enter a monastery. No sooner had he entered the monastery than he began to worry about his little daughter Marina, whom he had left in the care of a relative. He went to his abbot with his worries but in the process of telling the story changed his daughter into a son, Marinus. The abbot invited him to bring his young son to the monastery with him, where Marina continued to live as Marinus long after her father's death. One of her jobs in the monastery was to drive a cart down to the harbor to fetch supplies, necessitating an overnight stay in an inn. After one such visit a pregnant girl accused Marinus of seducing her, and Marinus, true to the code of the transvestite saints, suffered ostracism from the monastery rather than admit to her true sex. After her expulsion she and the infant boy lived as beggars at the gate of the monastery pleading to be readmitted. After some five years of this the monks at the monastery pleaded with the abbot to readmit her, and Marinus and "his son" both entered the monastery. The austerities which Marina imposed upon herself led to her death shortly after her readmission, and when the monks came to prepare her body for burial they naturally discovered her true sex. Inevitably the abbot of the monastery was overcome with remorse while the woman who had falsely accused her became possessed by demons. The demons were only driven away when the woman confessed her sin and called upon Saint Marina for intercession in heaven (Butler 1956, 1:313-14).

Though all of these stories are different, there is enough similarity that the German scholar Herman Usener (1879, p. 20) felt that they, as well as others, were simply Christian survivals of the legend of Aphrodite of Cyprus, where women sacrificed to the goddess in men's clothing and men in women's. He emphasized that Aphrodite was known also under the names of Pelagia and Marina, which would seem to give some sort of proof to his arguments. Not all scholars, however, accept such identification, and Father Delehaye (1961, pp. 204–6) in particular would argue against it. The purpose of this paper is not to decide one way or another but to emphasize that it was through such popular stories that female transvestism was given sanction in the Christian West. Moreover, all the stories seem to have implications that go beyond mere human interest. Usually, for example, the woman dons male clothing at a time when she is undergoing a crisis in her life, and transvestism seems to denote a breaking with her former existence. Some of the saints go to such extremes as burning their old clothes and even visualizing themselves as males. Saint Perpetua, for example, saw herself in a dream borne into an amphitheater, stripped of her clothes, and changed into a man (Delcourt 1956, pp. 90–99). It also seems fairly obvious that women were encouraged to visualize themselves as attaining the merits of the higher sex.

Athanasia of Antioch represents still another variant of the standard story of the transvestite saints. When her two children both died suddenly and unexpectedly on the same day, Athanasia began spending much of her time praying in a neighborhood church. One day she had a vision in which a stranger assured her that her children were both happy in heaven. When she told her husband, Andronicus, of the vision, the two decided to renounce the things of this world, and leaving everything behind in their house, they set out for Egypt to serve under Saint Daniel, famed for his ability to work miracles. Saint Daniel sent Andronicus to the monastery of Tabenna, while Athanasia became an anchorite and dressed in the habit of a man. After some 12 years of isolation on the desert, Athanasia decided to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem and during her travels fell in with another monk, actually her husband Andronicus, who was also making the pilgrimage. The two traveled together, joined in religious exercises, visited the holy places, and became so attached to each other that when they reached the place where they had met on their way to Jerusalem they were reluctant to be parted. Together they went to a monastery near Alexandria, and when they were admitted they were assigned cells near each other. Here they joyously filled their monkish duties until Athanasius (her male name) felt death approaching and began to weep. When questioned as to why she was weeping when she was about to go to God, she said she grieved for her fellow monk Andronicus, who will "miss me." The monks were asked to give Andronicus some writing of

hers, which they did, and then Andronicus, her friend and companion, suddenly realized that his friend Athanasius was really his wife (Butler 1956, 4:69–70).

There are still others whose stories have only slight variations: Saint Apollinaris or Dorotheus (Butler 1956, 1:33; all references in this paragraph are to Butler); Saint Eugenia (4:612); Saint Euphrosyne (1:4–5); Saint Theodora (3:623–25); Saint Anastasia Patricia (2:546–47); and the 12th-century Saint Hildegund (2:135). In two other cases the transvestistic experience is only incidental and temporary: Saint Thecla (3:623–25) and Saint Natalia (3:538).

Another variation of the legends of the transvestite saints is that of the bearded female saints, the most famous being Uncumber or Wilgefortis. According to tradition Wilgefortis was one of septuplets (some sources say nontuplets) born to a non-Christian ruler of Portugal and his Christian wife. Wilgefortis early decided to devote herself to Christianity and to remain a virgin, but her father had different ideas. When her betrothal to the king of Sicily was announced Wilgefortis protested to her father but he ordered her to marry the king. In desperation Wilgefortis prayed for help, and her prayer was answered by the sudden growth of a long drooping mustache and a silky curling beard. In spite of this her father pushed on with the marriage plans, but when the king of Sicily managed to see his future bride without her veil he refused to proceed with the marriage. In a fit of rage her father then had her crucified. The story has been described as having the “unenviable distinction of being one of the most obviously false and preposterous of the pseudo-pious romances by which simple Christians have been deceived or regaled” (Butler 1956, 3:151–52). In spite of this, she was much venerated, and as her story traveled across Europe she became known by a variety of names, usually derived from the term *liberata*, the deliverer. Thus in France she became *Livrade*, in Spain *Librada*, *Debarras* at Beauvais, *Ohnkummer* in Germany, *Ontcommer* in Flanders, and *Uncumber* in England. “Cumber,” possibly derived from the German *kummer*, meaning trouble, is now an archaic form, although the word “encumber” and its antonym “disencumber” are still used. At any rate, in England Uncumber became the patron saint of married women who wanted to rid themselves of their husbands. To encourage the saint to help them they brought offerings of oats, although the reasons for this particular gift are not clear (Edward 1969).

Uncumber is not alone in the bearded-saint category. There are at least two others. A Saint Galla, according to the legend, had been left a widow after only a year of marriage, and though she was young and healthy she refused to remarry because she felt that though matrimony “always begins with joy,” it “ends with sorrow.” Her physicians warned her that if she did not marry again she would grow a beard, but she



refused and, bearded, she joined a band of religious women who lived close to the Basilica of Saint Peter and spent her life taking care of the poor and needy (Butler 1956, 4:36–37). The third bearded saint is Paula, a virgin of Avila who, fleeing from a suitor she did not want, in desperation threw herself at the foot of a crucifix and implored Jesus to disfigure her. Her prayers were answered so rapidly that her suitors passed by without noticing her, disguised as she was with a full beard (*Acta Sanctorum* 1643, February, vol. 3, col. 174).<sup>2</sup>

The most famous transvestite in the medieval period, and the one who perhaps has caused the greatest anguish to Catholic historians, is the legendary Pope Joan, who supposedly ruled under the name of John Anglicus (Dollinger 1890; Cooke 1610; Wood 1931; *New Catholic Encyclopedia* 1967). Several 13th-century chroniclers wrote about her life in great detail, and during much of the later medieval period her existence was accepted as fact. A statue of her was included among the popes in the Cathedral of Sienna in the 14th century, and in the 15th century John Hus the Bohemian heretic reproached the delegates at the Council of Constance (1415) for allowing a woman to be pope. It was not until the 16th century, when her existence was seriously disputed, that she became relegated to legend rather than history. She still has an occasional supporter, although few in the scholarly world now accept her existence.

The legend is fairly complicated, and today it seems difficult to believe that people were convinced of its authenticity, but believe they did. Though there are various forms of the legend, Joan is usually said to have been born in England (hence the title “Anglicus” which is usually included in the legend). As a child she was taken by her father, a learned man, to Mainz, where she was taught to read and write. There she fell in love with a monk by the name of Ulfilias at the monastery of Fulda, and in order to be closer to him she disguised herself as a man and entered the monastery. Later she and Ulfilias traveled together as pilgrims, after a series of adventures making their way to Athens. The two, with Joan still in male dress, studied philosophy, theology, and holy and humane letters for some 10 years and acquired great reputations as scholars. Tragedy struck with the death of Ulfilias, and Joan, anxious and heartbroken, decided to return to Mainz. When she stopped in Rome on the way to Mainz, still in her male role, she found her reputation as a scholar had preceded her; and at the urging of some of her former pupils she began to lecture in Rome. As her reputation spread, she rose rapidly in the church hierarchy, becoming first a notary, then a cardinal, and, on Pope Leo’s death in the 850s, pope under the name of John VIII, Anglicus. Unfortunately she still had

<sup>2</sup> *Acta Sanctorum* is the standard collection of saints’ lives. I cite it in this study only where English versions are not available. Saints are listed in the month of their feast day.

a woman's sex drives, and grieving for her beloved Ulfilas, she fell in love with a Benedictine monk from Spain who was said to look like her dead lover. She became pregnant, although this phenomenon remained unnoticed until in the midst of a papal procession she entered labor and gave birth to a child. Both she and the child died shortly after, although there are conflicting versions. One version, in fact, has her child becoming pope later under the name of Adrian III. A vast amount of scholarly research has been expended on searching out the history of the period, and this paper is not the place to examine it in detail. It is important to emphasize that nowhere is there any hint of censure for her donning of male clothes, and her downfall came about not because of her transvestism but because of her "womanly weakness." Incidentally, the legend has also been used to justify an equally falacious belief that since her time all popes have had to prove they were males by sitting in a special chair.

None of the women so far discussed basically assaulted what men regarded as their prerogatives. Pope Joan perhaps came the closest, but in the final analysis she proved no match for the "superior" male. When a woman attempted to meet men on their own terms, however, she was in trouble. This appears most obviously in the account of Joan of Arc, and her transvestism was one of the major reasons for her execution. In the original complaints against Joan it was charged that she had

a male costume made for her, with arms to match. . . . When these garments and these arms were made, fitted and completed, the said Jeanne put off and entirely abandoned woman's clothes; with her hair cropped short and round like a young fop's, she wore shirt, breeches, doublet, with hose joined together and fastened to the said doublet by 20 points, long leggins laced on the outside, a short mantle reaching to the knees, or thereabouts, a close cut cap, tight fitting boots and buskins, long spurs, sword, dagger, breastplate, lance, and other arms in the style of a man-at-arms, with which she performed actions of war and affirmed that she was fulfilling the commands of God as they had been revealed to her. [Barrett 1931, p. 152]

Later the various charges against her were summarized in 12 articles, of which two dealt with transvestism, as did two of the six admonitions directed against her. Joan eventually recanted, and as part of her recantation she promised to don female clothing. It was her resumption of male dress that led to her execution. When asked why she had resumed it, Joan answered that "she had taken it of her own will, under no compulsion, as she preferred man's to woman's dress. She was told that she had promised and sworn not to wear man's dress again and answered that she never meant to take such an oath. Asked for what reason she had assumed male costume, she answered that it was more lawful and convenient for her to wear it, since she was among men, than to wear woman's dress" (Barrett 1931, p. 158).

Joan was undoubtedly different from the other transvestite saints in that she threatened men on their own grounds and even wore battle dress. Unlike the other women, however, she was always recognized as a woman and never made an effort to be other than a woman in male garb. Superficially, at least, it was simple cross-dressing which brought about her downfall. This was emphasized in the postmortem trial which led to her rehabilitation, where the testimony indicated she had been forced to assume the male dress and in so doing had signed her own death warrant. It was claimed that, when she had arisen on the morning in question, she found that her jailers had removed all of her woman's clothes, leaving only male garments behind. Knowing that the male costume was forbidden to her, she asked for her woman's clothes, but the guards refused to return them. Rather than put on the male clothes she had returned to bed until noon, when physical necessity finally forced her to put on the forbidden male garments to answer the call of nature. Though politically the English probably always meant to execute her, it is nonetheless a fascinating comment upon the attitudes of the time that they used the resumption of male dress, something which they undoubtedly had engineered, as their basis (Scott 1956, p. 14). Quite obviously, for a woman to assume a male guise to become more holy was permitted, but to compete with men on masculine grounds such as warfare was simply not permitted. Such competition represented not a gain in the status of woman but a loss of status for men, since a mere woman could succeed at what they regarded as strictly male tasks.

Compared to female transvestism, male transvestism was nearly nonexistent; but it was tolerated under two conditions: when there was only an illusion of the female and when the male in drag was performing a function that society wanted and desired but would not, because of other prohibitions, allow women to do. In effect the status loss associated with male cross-dressing was only allowed when other more dearly held values of society otherwise would have been threatened. The most obvious example of this was on the stage as drama began to revive in the later Middle Ages. In Greek times most of the women's roles had been acted by men, but the Romans, who were much more open-minded on the subject, allowed women to portray themselves. Actresses, however, received a bad name, as did the theater in general, and the early church fathers strongly condemned it. Though such condemnation did not entirely eliminate drama in such areas as Constantinople, and plays continued to be written in western Europe by such people as the nun Hrotswitha in the 10th century, professional acting more or less disappeared, although the amateur still remained (Tunison 1969).

The key forces in the development of modern drama were the medieval mystery play, emphasizing the passion of Jesus, and the morality play,

emphasizing the saints' lives. Since these plays were performed in the church, most of the actors were drawn from the ranks of priests or would-be priests. This tradition continued well after the medieval period, and occasionally we even get glimpses of some of the actors. This is the case with a young barber's apprentice at Metz who is said to have performed the role of Saint Barbara so "thoughtfully and reverently that several persons wept for pity; for he showed such fluency of elocution and such polite manners, and his countenance and gestures were so expressive when among his maidens, that there was not a nobleman or priest or layman who did not wish to receive this youth into his house to feed and educate him; among whom there was a rich widow . . . who wanted to adopt him as her heir" (Mantzius 1937, p. 89). The youth's reputation as a female impersonator was short-lived because the next year when he acted the part of Saint Catherine his voice changed and the audience was not so impressed. The young man then abandoned his acting career and went off to Paris to study for the priesthood.

Females were not entirely excluded from the mystery or morality plays, and there are occasional references to them. In general, nonetheless, it was not considered proper for a woman to exhibit herself, and in most of the plays men kept a monopoly. In the beginning, when the priests and acolytes had been the only actors, it was out of the question that women share in the performance. As more secular plays developed, such as farces, the actors for the most part were vagabonds and were regarded as outcasts. Few women appeared in these companies either. This meant that men almost exclusively played the woman's role, and they were not condemned for this, since they were already regarded as low-status persons, outside the recognized caste system. The organized minstrel companies were also usually all male (Jusserand, n.d., pp. 177-218). It was not until the 16th century in Italy that women began to appear as characters in plays portraying themselves. From surviving references it is almost possible to trace the replacement of men by women in the women's parts. For example, in Lyons the first professional actresses appear in 1548 (Gilder 1960, pp. 46 ff.). In general the movement to use women spread from Italy to France, and thence to Spain and eastward on the continent and eventually to England. It was not until the 17th century that the English fully accepted women playing women's parts. Even then, however, many of the female parts were still enacted by men. In brief, the prohibitions against transvestism, which seem to have been more socially enforced for males than for females, apparently did not apply to the stage because society put a higher value on women keeping their place in society than they did on realism on the stage. Moreover, actors as a class were considered outcasts from the social structure and therefore did not lose status

by donning women's clothes for the performance. Transvestism in essence was justified to emphasize a higher virtue in society.

Male transvestism was also permitted under certain carefully controlled conditions during festivals or carnivals in which the usual standards of behavior were laid aside. Although few of these medieval carnivals have been studied in detail, we know that in some of them women were allowed to act the male role, and men, to wear women's clothes. In the Nuremberg festivals of the late medieval period a number of male dancers wore feminine masks and probably dressed as women. In fact, it seems to be such a common phenomenon that one authority has said that disguising as the opposite sex was a custom that was "peculiar to all carnivals." The Mummers' parade in Philadelphia or the Mardi Gras in New Orleans are continuations of this old custom. A standard feature of the Nuremberg carnival was the Wild Woman, probably a man impersonating a woman, who appears in several illustrations of the 15th century (Sumberg 1966). Such parades not only removed some of the status inhibitions of society, since there were boy bishops, and kings of the varlets, but also dropped some of the sex barriers as well and undoubtedly in this respect served the same function as the Christmas office party or the Halloween and New Year's balls of today.

In theory transvestism may well have been prohibited by the medieval church, but in practice the church did not seem to be too concerned about cross-dressing, providing it took certain socially desirable forms and was rigidly circumscribed. Under such conditions, in fact, it was institutionalized. Only when it went beyond the tolerated levels and threatened the status quo, as happened with Joan of Arc, or when it took on too much erotic appeal, as in the case of a man disguising himself as a woman in order to live in a convent, was there a reaction to it. The most remarkable aspect of medieval transvestism, however, is the difference in treatment of the male and female transvestite. A female who secretly wore men's clothes was not considered abnormal. That a female might desire to be a male, in fact, seemed to be a healthy desire, a normal longing not unlike the desire of a peasant to become a noble. This did not mean that either women or peasants were allowed to cross the status lines in great numbers but that the desire to do so was accepted as a norm. Though men might dress as women at carnivals, and the lord might mix with the peasants at various festivals, the status loss in any real change along these lines was so threatening that anything more than play acting was forbidden. On the other hand, those women who were successful in changing identities were not stigmatized but instead accepted, and not a few were sainted. Throughout the literature of the time, even that written by women, such as the 12th-century Anna Comnena (1928), those characteristics in women most sought after were said to be the masculine qualities. These were the higher

qualities, while the feminine qualities were the lower ones (Bullough 1973a); and inevitably men who dressed as women had to be stigmatized and their actions linked with some type of deviant eroticism, or in more modern times with psychopathology. Such men were in our terms mentally ill, while women who cross-dressed were not regarded as suitable for study or at least have not been studied.

If this analysis is correct, then the root cause of Western hostility to transvestism is not so much biblical prohibitions but status loss. This explains why there are so few female transvestites in psychological literature, since society in fact encourages women to assume male roles as a sign of their superiority to other women, and only rarely regards such women as abnormal. Only when women threatened the male establishment by taking too overt a masculine role have they been ostracized in the past. By implication, then, if an undercurrent of status loss in assuming a woman's role still prevails in Western society, and studies of women's occupations such as nursing indicate that it does (Bullough and Bullough 1969), then we must also take into account a desire for status loss, either permanent or temporary, as a possible explanation for male transvestism today, regardless of whether it is homosexual or heterosexual.

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